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Hurricane Bill; OR, MUSTANG SAM AND HIS "PARD."

A Romance of the "Evil Land."

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AUTHOR OF "YELLOWSTONE JACK," "BLACK JOHN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FEATS IN THE SADDLE.

SHRILL cries and loud cheers—the confused trampling of hoofs—the neighing of horses—the loud bellowing of affrighted cattle—mingled with an occasional peal of musical laughter or little screams of admiration at some ludicrous mishap or more than usually adroitfeat.

A little corral, containing over a hundred bulls, now wrought up to almost madness by the horsemen who dashed to and fro upon their fiery little mustangs, dexterously avoiding the many vicious thrusts made by the stout-horned animals with an address little short of marvelous. And through this seeming confusion, the horsemen separated the animals selected by the ranchero, who sat upon a fine mustang outside the corral, from the main body with their long lances, and drove them into a second and smaller inclosure beside the stand upon which stood the ladies.

The varied exclamations of the fair spectators were, as with one accord, merged into a clear, musical cry of wondering admiration, and their scarfs fluttered in a silken cloud. This outburst was occasioned by a feat performed by one of the riders—a volunteer, who had already displayed more than common dexterity.

A sudden turn and surge of the entire body of excited bulls had penned him up in one corner of the corral, just giving him time to turn his mustang, and prepare for desperate work. A single yell—a dig of the heavy spurs and stroke of the blood-stained quirt, caused the mustang to rise like a bird, fairly clearing the threatening horns of the foremost bulls, alighting heavily upon the sea of broad, shining backs. A loud bellow of terror—a shrill neigh—a ringing yell as the cruel rawhide hisses through the air, and the mustang madly plunged forward—only to fall upon its side and sink between the yielding bodies, to

be trampled out of all semblance of life by the sharp, cloven hoofs. But the rider? He parted from his horse, and with agile bounds leaped from one back to another until, with a light spring, he stood safe and sound upon the sand beyond. Then it was that the fair spectators gave vent to their feelings; and, without one look toward the still bellowing bulls, the cavalier dropped his sombrero and bowed low, until the long, elf-like locks of jetty black hair half concealed his face.

The arrangements are not those of a "bullfight;" then what sport is on the tapis? Something less pretentious, yet scarcely less interesting—the game of "Colea de Toros," or "tailing the bull," added to others, as *el gallo*—"the cock," etc. In fine, 'tis a "feast day."

"Mira—look yonder!" abruptly cried one of the ladies, pointing with one taper finger to a point far beyond the corral. "Estrangeros!"

"Some of our more distant friends who

have heard of our feast, Carmela," replied her companion.

"Not so, Isidora—their dress is not that of our people. They are more like these heretics—these terrible Yanques of whom we hear so much talk."

"I hope—Our Lady grant that they may be!" half laughed Isidora, her black eyes sparkling. "They are men—men who can defend the heart they have won!"

"And father—and Luis; are not *they* men?" reproachfully replied Carmela; but Isidora made no reply.

She was watching the rapidly-approaching horsemen. And so were all the others. A stranger was looked upon with suspicion in that lone region. When first the dust-cloud was observed, quick glances were interchanged. The same thought could be read in the eyes of all. Were the Apaches—that terrible scourge of the desert—were the Apaches coming?

At a long, steady lop the horsemen advanced, nor did they draw rein until within two score yards of the assembled Mexicans. Then one, mounted upon a black mustang of uncommon size and beauty, raised his hand and cried, in a clear, ringing tone:

"You needn't be afeared, gentlemen—we ain't on the war-path, just now, but—"

"Afraid!" echoed the black Mexican, who had so narrowly escaped the death that overtook his mustang, as he spurred his fresh mount forward a pace. "Afraid—and of only two heretics?"

"Easy, thar, greaser—you can't put on frills over weuns. We ain't ticks nur fleas, nuther. If you want to know our handles, this ere chap's called Hurricane Bill—"

"Of the Cherokee Nation, pard—put the hull figger down," quickly interrupted the other stranger.

"Hurricane Bill of the Cherokee Nation, then, an' I'm Mustang Sam," quietly added the speaker.

The dark-browed Mexican fell back, his countenance turning an ashen hue, while a slight stir ran through the crowd. It was evident that they had heard of these names before. Then one—a grizzled man, of open countenance, rode forward, with outstretched hand, saying, politely:

"Senors, you are welcome here. We have heard of you—as who have not? But let bygones go. You proved yourselves brave enemies, and though I have often wished to meet you while fighting for my country, I am proud now to salute you as friends."



HURRICANE BILL'S DEFIANCE.

"You do us proud, boss," heartily said Mustang Sam, as he grasped the proffered hand. "Ef all greasers d' a' been like you we wouldn't 'a' hed so much scrimmagin'. But thar—es you say, let the past slide. We're out on the loose, now, Bill an' me, lookin' fer fun. We heard tell o' your sports up here, an' so rid over to take a hand in, ef you'd no objections."

Don Munez expressed his pleasure, and then introduced the strangers to his friends, after which Luis, his son, in obedience probably to a slight signal from his sister Isidora, escorted them to the stand where the ladies were. In the introduction that followed, the borderers did not appear to the best advantage, actually seeming bashful and timid before the two-score bright eyes that beamed upon them full of interest and curiosity; for the fair señoritas had heard many accounts of the reckless daring and wonderful skill of the Texan scouts who had wrought their forces so much injury during the war recently ended.

Truly, they formed a notable contrast to the diminutive, almost effeminate Mexicans.

"Hurricane Bill, of the Cherokee Nation"—as he himself would insist upon having his title recorded—and, reader, I am describing a man who is yet living, whose name and deeds are well-known to thousands of Western men, particularly those living in South-western Kansas and the Indian Territory) was a model of muscular strength and symmetry. Considerably over six feet in height, he seemed light-built in proportion; but the broad shoulders, deep chest, round body and small waist, the swelling hips, long thighs and small feet, were in admirable symmetry. It was all bone and muscle; active as a deer, supple as a panther, Hurricane Bill was nearly as strong as a buffalo bull. His complexion was almost dazzlingly fair, upon which the torrid sun seemed to make no impression. His hair was yellow, falling in curling locks over his shoulders; his eyes a deep, bright blue; a long mustache shaded his lip; a small imperial upon the chin. His garb—all of buck-skin, save for the blue flannel shirt and gray felt hat—as plain and unornamented. A brace of Colt's revolvers, heavy size, a Bowie-knife with a twelve-inch blade and a short, large-bored rifle completed his arms.

Mustang Sam was several inches shorter, yet no less perfectly proportioned. Unlike Hurricane Bill, he was a perfect type of the "frontier dandy"—in dress, at least.

A wine-colored jacket of fine cloth, ornamented with buttons of gold and white silk—doubtless wrought by the fingers of dove—cut low at the throat; trowsers of dark-blue broad-cloth, slashed from the knees downward, laced with a golden cord, thickly studded with bells and Spanish coins; short boots of curiously-stamped Cordovan leather covered his feet, armed with the cruel-looking Mexican spurs. Upon his head was a short skull-cap or turban, worked with beads and stained quills. From beneath this the jetty black hair fell nearly to Mustang Sam's waist, slightly curling at the ends. A long, silken mustache, arched eyebrows and keen, lustrous eyes lent firmness to the otherwise effeminate beautiful face; for the mouth was small and arched, the red lips slightly pouting; the teeth even and white as pearls, and a spot of scarlet burned upon each cheek.

Such was Mustang Sam—who was better known by the addition "Mad Rider"—a dandy in appearance, but one who proved himself every inch a man, on a thousand occasions.

"You wished to witness our games, then, señor?" observed Isidora, as Luis turned to obey a signal from his father from the plain below.

"Yes, lady," replied the borderer, mustering his best Spanish, feeling strangely nervous under the bright, sparkling eyes, and trembling slightly as he felt the dainty little brown hand touch his arm. "We heard of it yesterday, and so rode this way, as we had no particular object in view, beyond passing away the time. But I'm glad that I came, now."

"Yes—there will be glorious sport—we have some skillful horsemen here," laughed Isidora, though the quick side glance told that she understood his thought. "But you will join them? We have heard much of your riding—of your noble black horse—you will gratify me—us?"

"As your knight, I'll not fear to measure skill with even the gallant cavaliers yonder—but if I succeed, I shall ask you for the knot of ribbon at your breast."

Isidora hesitated for a moment, then removed the scarlet knot and fastened it upon Mustang Sam's broad breast, saying, half seriously:

"Thus I enlist you as my knight—do your de-

voirs gallantly, and Our Blessed Lady will smile upon you!"

"I'd rather have *your* smiles—what're you laughin' at, Hurricane Bill?" Mustang added, angrily, as a low chuckle met his ear.

"Who's laffin'? Cain't a feller cough, ef so be he feels like it? But, pard," Hurricane whispered, "you kin go it! 'F I only hed your cheek—"

"Go to thunder!" muttered Mustang, turning aside.

"See! the sport begins!" cried Isidora.

The bars of the small inclosure were lowered, and a fine young bull, seeing the wide, level plain before him, dashed away at the top of his speed. With wild yells, the impatient horsemen darted in pursuit, each striving to outstrip his competitors and be the first to "tail the bull." So densely were they crowded together that only first rate horsemanship prevented accidents, but then they gradually scattered, the swifter or more adroit taking the lead.

After a run of nearly a mile, two horsemen were hard upon the animal's heels; Luis Munez and the dark Mexican, whom Isidora said was Don Blas Cavello. Don Luis was ahead, and bending, clutched the animal's tail, securing it beneath his right thigh, then turning abruptly at a right angle from his original course, sought to overturn the bull. But his horse made a misstep and fell heavily, casting the young man over its head to the ground, where he lay in a motionless heap.

The agitated cries of the women who noticed this catastropho were mingled with a loud cheer as Don Blas dexterously overthrew the bull.

A rush was made to where Don Luis lay, Mustang Sam and Hurricane Bill being among the foremost, but he was found to have escaped with but a few bruises, and was speedily in the saddle again.

At a signal from Don Munez, two half-wild bulls were separated from the rest, and both loosed at once. The Mexicans stood aside, giving the border brothers a fair field. And then, knowing that bright eyes were closely watching them, the scouts—as they would have expressed it—"jest nat'ally spread themselves!"

Hurricane Bill, upon a large, bony "Buck-skin" from the States, spent no time in "cutting didoes," but, true to his *sobriquet*, dashed forward and closed with his bull before it could cover a hundred yards. Securing the tail, he flung the bull heavily upon its side, then leaped to the ground directly in front of the bellowing brute as it scrambled to its feet, a wild fire in its eyes, every hair standing upon end.

Uttering his shrill war-cry, Hurricane Bill grasped the short thick horns and raised the animal's head by main strength. With an angry bellow the bull leaped aside and sought to rid itself of its antagonist. For a moment both feet of the borderer were off the ground, and it seemed to all that in a moment more he must be crushed to the ground beneath the sharp, cutting hoofs or else impaled upon the sharp horns. But it was only for an instant.

Then, securing his footing, Hurricane brought every ounce of his strength into play, and twisting the bull's head around until its nose pointed toward the sky, he dexterously kicked one forefoot from under it. And then, with a half-choked bellow of rage and pain, the huge brute fell heavily to the ground.

"Bully for you, Hurricane!" yelled Mustang, as he dashed past. "We'll put a wrinkle or two on the greaser's horns this pop!"

While his comrade had been thus engaged, Mustang Sam had been keeping his bull in play, riding around and round it upon his magnificent black mustang, preventing it from leaving the vicinity. But now, seeing that all eyes were bent upon him, he set to work in earnest,

Turning the bull toward the stand occupied by the women, Mustang "tailed" him in full view, then lightly leaped from Tornado upon the fallen animal's back. Bellowing and snorting with terror the bull leaped up and plunged madly forward, striving to unseat its rider. But as well might a buffalo seek to cast off its hump. Mustang Sam clung there with the tenacity of a monkey, amid the loud shouts and bursts of laughter at the ridiculous spectacle. Then, as though despairing of ridding itself of the uncomfortable burden by leaping and jumping, the bull stretched out over the plain like a quarter horse.

Mustang Sam stripped off his jacket and bending forward, flung it over the animal's eyes, effectually blinding it; then, grasping a horn, he pulled heavily upon it causing the animal to describe a wide circle.

During all this, Tornado, though unsignaled by his master, acted with almost human intelligence,

keeping close beside the bellowing bull, avoiding its blind charging with a catlike activity, its eyes fixed upon its loved master as though ready to perform its part at the slightest motion.

In this manner, as though yoked together they ran fairly around the corral, and reached the spot where Mustang had first thrown the bull. Then Sam uttered a single sharp whistle as he freed his jacket, and Tornado pressed closer to the bull until their sides touched. An agile bound, and Mustang Sam was once more seated in the saddle. Then, as if satisfied, he trotted up to the stand and rejoined Isidora, who took him to task for making her laugh herself ill—which gave Mustang a chance for a compliment; but—though *they* seemed deeply interested in the conversation—I doubt whether the reader would care for an exact report. But one thing is certain; if they had never done so before, both Hurricane Bill and Mustang Sam were making love fast and furious now.

Nor did either Carmela or Isidora appear very much displeased—remember, reader, they manage matters very differently in Mexico from what we do in our cold clime.

But there was one who did not seem to relish the close attention paid Carmela, by Hurricane Bill. This was Don Blas Cavello, who also—as if satisfied with the skill he had already displayed—abandoned the saddle for the society of the ladies. Hurricane Bill simply smiled at the sullen glances he received. Just then he was not in the humor for a "muss."

The sport was continued thus for a couple of hours, until each cavalier had an opportunity to display his address and skill. Then preparations were made for a game of another sort.

This was *el gallo*—the cock. A rooster, its head and neck fairly dripping with grease, was secured by one leg to a stout stake driven into the ground. Starting at a gallop, the Mexicans rode swiftly toward the spot, bending low down in the saddle and making a grasp at the cock's neck—the only part by which it was to be caught. The first half dozen failed, either by the bird dodging aside, or else its greased neck slipping through their fingers, but then one managed to break the cord that bound the fowl to the stake, and with a yell of triumph put spurs to his steed and dashed away to the "turning post"—a small clump of cactus—closely followed by the others, whose object was to wrest the fowl from his grasp. The one who succeeded in carrying the bird, or the largest part of it, back to the starting point, was to be hailed the winner, whether he was the one who first plucked the fowl or not.

It was a cruel, but animated sport—the mass of horsemen, some two score in all, straining every nerve, riding recklessly; and more than once half a dozen men and animals were rolling in a confused heap over the ground together. The cock was torn to pieces, and thus the fortunate ones returned to the starting point, bearing in triumph a handful of feathers, or perchance a mangled limb of the ill-starred cock.

"Ah! in my time 'twas different," uttered an old woman to her neighbor. "In one day Antone Diaz carried off three cocks and laid them at my feet alive and without a ruffled feather!"

And the two ancients wagged their white heads sadly over their degenerate descendants.

"There are as good men and skillful cavaliers now as then," a little sharply retorted Don Blas. "What man has done, man can do again, and I pledge my honor that Senorita Carmela—if she will deign to accept it from my hands—shall have the next cock, alive and unhurt."

"Don't let him make his words good," hastily whispered Isidora to Mustang Sam. "Sister hates and fears that man—you can foil him."

"I'd do more than that to please you," quietly replied Mustang, as he whistled to Tornado.

Hurricane Bill also took saddle, but a few quick words passed between the comrades, and he, knowing that Mustang far surpassed him in such feats, contented himself with closely watching the play, holding his Buck-skin ready for a sudden burst if it became necessary.

At the signal, away dashed the riders, with Don Blas slightly in the lead, Mustang Sam just lapping his quarter, the mere weight of his finger controlling Tornado. Bending low Don Blas clutched the bird's neck, a sharp pull snapping the cord; but the cry of triumph that rose to his lips changed to a bitter curse of rage as Tornado darted forward like a flash and the dexterous fingers of Mustang Sam snapped the fluttering prize from the Mexican's fingers. With a shrill, taunting laugh, the Mad Rider gave Tornado free rein and flew over the level

plain like a meteor, changing his grasp to the cock's feet.

Pausing at the cactus clump, Mustang Sam held the cock aloft with a loud laugh. His competitors were rapidly coming up, though evidently not a little surprised at the ease with which Tornado had distanced their pet animals. They were destined to wonder still more, ere long.

Mustang Sam dashed round the bush, then rode swiftly at right-angles with his original course. The Mexicans turned to cut him off, using both spur and quirt, and some of them uttered shouts of triumph as they neared the black stallion.

But Tornado wheeled in his tracks as though upon a pivot and with a dozen mighty bounds passed behind the surprised riders, and headed toward the goal. Now only two horsemen were before Mustang, each heading diagonally toward him. One was Don Blas; the other was Hurricane Bill.

Mustang Sam did not change his course, though even the spectators could see that the others must intercept him. One breathless moment—then came a dull *thud*—a cloud of dust—a wild laugh as the figure of the Mad Rider and his matchless steed rose above it, cleaving the air like a swallow on the wing.

Hurricane Bill and Don Blas had come into collision, and the smaller animal was overthrown, while Tornado, lifted by the strong hand of his rider, lightly cleared the struggling mass. And side by side the comrades galloped back to the stand, where Mustang silently presented the unharmed fowl to Isidora. As she accepted the trophy, the cock lifted its crest and crowed loudly.

Don Blas Cavello, his gay attire sadly soiled, though he himself had escaped the awkward tumble unharmed, was almost speechless with rage and mortification, though he managed to articulate sundry hearty curses upon the trick Hurricane Bill had played him. But even his own partisans laughed him down on this point, for, in *el gallo* all ruses and stratagems are considered legitimate.

"You don't seem to like my style, stranger," said Hurricane Bill, quietly, but with a steely glitter in his blue eye that could not be mistaken. "Now I ain't much on the talk—I'd rather act, a durned sight—but I will say this much. You seem to think you're some pumpkins—mebbe you be. I'm only Hurricane Bill, from the Cherokee Nation—a teeny bit o' a young greenhorn. But I like to give a man a sight fer his pile, an' I'll give you a chainte to git even, ef so be you think I played it fine on ye, a bit sence. Jest say how ye wish—afoot or on hossback—th' knives, pistols or rifles ary one or the lot—it's all the same to me."

"No!" quickly interrupted Don Munez, stepping forward. "There must be no quarreling between friends on this day. Gentlemen, I call on you—help me keep peace!"

"Don't be a fool, Hurricane," muttered Mustang, in his chum's ear. "Mebbe we mought clean out the crowd, but ef we'd hurt any o' thar'lations, they'd give us the shake—see?"

"You're right, pard—I didn't think o' that!"

CHAPTER II.

REVOLVER AND LASSO.

"HURRICANE, what ye say to givin' the greasers a spec'min o' your shootin'?" added Mustang.

"Jest as you say, pard," was the quiet reply, though the blue eyes wandered toward the post against which the plump, trim figure of Carmela Munez was leaning.

"Gentlemen," added Mustang Sam, turning toward the Mexicans who were still gathered around the sullen Don Blas Cavello; "you have kindly allowed us to join in your sports, first showing us how the feats were to be performed. Now, with your permission, we will return the compliment by giving you a specimen of our northern sports, though doubtless you can improve upon them."

"Let up, pard—your tongue runs at both ends this mornin'. Cut it short an' let's git to work," impatiently muttered Hurricane.

"Easy, sport; I'm running this machine. You look to your barkers, and leave the fine touches to me," a little sharply replied Mustang Sam.

Hurricane held his peace, and took a quick glance at the condition of his revolvers. Satisfied that they were in their usual good order, he listened, with what grace he could summon, to Mustang Sam's long-winded peroration.

"What d' y' want to try fust?" that worthy demanded, as he rejoined Hurricane Bill.

"Splits or tossups, I don't keer which; then we kin try it on hossback," was the brief reply.

Without more ado, the borderers walked up to the corral, and Mustang Sam stood with his back against the huge square post upon one side of the gate. Drawing a long-bladed bowie-knife, he held it firmly with the haft resting upon his head, the keen edge in front. After a critical glance, Hurricane Bill drew his revolver, cocked it and strode swiftly away. At the twentieth pace, he abruptly wheeled and his arm arose, clasping the dark-tubed weapon.

A pause scarce long enough for the wondering Mexicans to draw a single breath—then came the clear, ringing report. Without lowering his hand, Hurricane Bill recocked the weapon and fired again and again until the six-chambered cylinder was empty. Then, as though he had no further interest in the matter, he began dexterously but carefully recharging his revolver.

"Gentlemen!" cried Mustang Sam, for the moment forgetting his Spanish, as he lowered the bowie-knife. "Hyar you've got the great American pinny-pinny-poppy-show whar kin be seed'd the high-cock-alorum, Senor Don Bullet-Splitter, together with the wild and untamed and unequaled ring-tailed bedbug, which is me!"

Though not understanding much of the hunter's rigmarole, the Mexicans crowded around the post, and then broke into excited exclamations of wonder and awe. The revolver bullets had been fairly split in half against the edge of the bowie-knife, and the portions could now be seen, just imbedded in the wood sufficiently to keep them from falling to the ground.

"Don't act the monkey, Mustang," snapped Hurricane, impatiently. "They're lookin' at ye, man!"

As Sam turned, he caught the bright glance of Isidora's eyes, and it was laughable to note how quickly he subsided from the vaunting position he had taken. Glancing along the sandy level, he hastily picked up a couple of small objects, they were a species of tiny gourds, probably two inches in diameter.

"Take your posish, Hurricane—keep your eyes skinned. I'll send the second one a few feet to the left o' the fust."

"Let 'em flicker!"

Mustang Sam tossed the round gourd high up into the air, and Hurricane Bill's revolver muzzle followed its motion with a wonderful quickness and steadiness. Just as the little black ball paused—or seemed to pause before returning to earth, the weapon exploded. The ball vanished. Instead, nothing could be seen but a few whirling fragments of the shell that had been so dexterously shattered by the unerring bullet.

Like an echo came the second report. Mustang Sam did not give the spectators time to vent their wondering admiration, but tossed up the second ball. As before, Hurricane Bill cocked his pistol without lowering his hand, and was in readiness for the flying target, firing with the same result as before.

"Is there any gentleman present who will loan me a sombrero—one that will not be hurt by an air hole in the crown?" cried Mustang Sam, in Spanish, as he whistled to Tornado, who came galloping up with a whicker of delight. "Thanks!" he added, catching one out of the dozen or more tossed him. "Now, Hurricane, straddle your critter—work 'er up lively, pard—but don't make a mistake an' sock it to me in the ribs!"

The tall plainsman made no reply, but vaulted into the saddle, and guiding his "Buck-skin" with the pressure of his knees alone, galloped out upon the plain. Mustang Sam faced him, holding the stiff sombrero under his curved arm, the crown facing the marksman.

A wild yell, then the border-brothers sped swiftly toward each other. When within twenty yards, Hurricane Bill flung up his arm and fired, then, as the animals thundered past each other, he turned in the saddle and discharged two shots in rapid succession.

With a wild, ringing burst of laughter, Mustang Sam wheeled around and galloped back to where the Mexicans were grouped.

"Senor," he said, politely, "I fear your sombrero is no longer waterproof, but if a couple of onzas—"

The Mexican eagerly grasped the mutilated hat, and gloats over the three round holes, declaring that he would not part with it for a hundred ounces—that he would preserve it forever, as a memento of the king shot of the world."

"He can shoot," coolly replied Mustang, "though this was not a fair test. My arm trembled—I injured it while riding that bull—

or you would have found only one hole for the three bullets."

"Kinder easy, Mustang," muttered Hurricane Bill.

"But, gentlemen," continued the scout, unheeding his partner's remonstrance, "there is still one test that is worth seeing—only it requires steadier nerves than I can boast of—the only time I tried it, I trembled a little, and as a natural consequence I went down with a lead pill through my body. It's this," and as he spoke, Mustang plucked a small, round bladed stiletto from his bosom, placing the haft against his breast, the point outward. "You hold this toy, thus; he fires at it, and hits the point so exactly that the bullet is *threaded* upon the blade and is stopped by the guard, here. Now if there is any gentleman present who would like to assist my friend in performing this marvelous feat, all he—"

"Marvelous indeed!" exclaimed a voice.

"Did you accept, senor?" quickly uttered Mustang, turning toward Don Blas.

"Thanks—no! I've not yet confessed," quietly replied the Mexican, showing his white teeth.

"Ah! you are afraid you might tremble, too—well, I think it quite likely you would!"

"Do you mean, senor, to—"

"I mean whatever you please—can you comprehend that?" coolly retorted Mustang Sam, bending forward.

"Senor Don Blas Cavello," sharply interposed Don Munez, his dark eye glittering. "You forget yourself. These gentlemen are my guests, and as such you must regard and treat them, unless you wish to make me an enemy."

The black Mexican turned abruptly and called to one of his men, who promptly galloped out upon the plain, after snatching up a long lance from the stacked arms beside the corral fence. Don Blas followed more slowly, coiling his horse-hair lasso.

At a signal from his master, the man spurred forward in a line that would carry him, if maintained, past Cavello at about twenty feet distant. But at a cry from the Don, he abruptly checked his animal and flung the heavy lance forward with considerable strength and skill. At the same moment Don Blas launched his lasso through the air, and then swiftly drawing back his arm, broke the stout lance-shaft in twain, the noose having encircled the weapon in mid-air. It was really a dextrous feat, and the two scouts added their mite to the chorus of approving shouts that rent the air.

"You see, senor, others can hit a flying target as well as you," half-sneered Don Blas.

"A lasso can be dodged—not so a bullet," retorted Mustang Sam, with a quick signal to his comrade, who seemed about to make a hasty reply.

"Can you dodge a lasso?" sneered Cavello.

"If thrown by you I can—yes, or two—three of them—for money," quietly retorted Mustang Sam.

At a gesture from Don Blas, a little, swarthy man advanced and produced a long leather pouch from which he extracted a handful of glittering onzas.

"How many have you there?" demanded Mustang.

"Twelve, senor," was the reply, as he counted the handful of gold coins, which were promptly covered.

"But the terms of the bet?" interposed Don Munez.

"That he cannot dodge three of our lassoes—"

"Let's make it a little plainer, senor," interrupted Mustang Sam. "We are all to be mounted, armed as we are now, to ride where and how we please. You are each to use a single lasso. I will use my knife and yonder broken lance-butt. If I do not disable your lassoes, you win; if you fail to unhorse me before then, I win. No other person is to interfere, unless one of us attempts to make use of other weapons than the ones named. Do you agree?"

"Yes, only—"

"Well, senor?" inquired Mustang, as he hesitated.

"I just happen to think that you might wish to leave some message for your friends. If so, we will wait for you," laughed Don Blas.

"Thank you for nothing, senor. Did you ever hear a coyote attempt to imitate the cry of a jaguar? I have."

"This is a fool trick o' yours, Mustang," muttered Hurricane Bill, as the Mad Rider turned away from the Mexicans. "What good can it do you, even s'pose you beat the varmints? Better let me walk into the greaser—it'd be the easiest way."

"Yes, you al'ays want all the fun yourself, pard; but you know me—an' you know Tornado, too. In less'n ten minutes you'll see three badly-fooled greasers—an' mebbe one on 'em with a broken neck, fer he's goin' down, shore!"

"Ef they should get the better o' you, pard, you kin jest bet high thar'll be a hullsake funeral round hyar in hafe less'n no time. I'll show these greasers how a white man kin handle revolvers."

"You won't have the chance, pard. I'm runnin' this machine," laughed Mustang. "Yonder they go!"

As he spoke, Don Cavello and two picked men rode apart from the main body, holding their lassoes in hand. Mustang Sam only paused to add:

"Ef you see any foul play, sock it to 'em, Hurricane; but don't interfere onless."

Then galloping forward he bent low in the saddle and deftly picked up the broken lance-shaft; a stout piece of wood some six feet or more in length. Then making a half-circuit, he wheeled round and faced the three Mexicans.

In obedience to a gesture from Don Blas, the two men shot out to the left and right, evidently meaning to close in with the American upon the flanks, while their chief attacked him in front. Mustang Sam sat quietly watching them, a bare bowie-knife in his right hand, his left grasping the bridle-reins and the broken shaft.

A single moment of breathless interest, in which all eyes were riveted upon the brilliant figure of the bold scout, who was, apparently, the coolest person upon the grounds. Then came a sudden change.

At a wild yell from the lips of Don Blas Cavello, the three horsemen dashed forward at full speed, the black, snake-like coils of the lassoes swiftly circling above their heads. Then the coils shot through the air, lengthening, settling in a sinuous tracery over the motionless form.

A cry of wondering apprehension burst from the Mexican spectators—echoed back in shriller tones from the stand where cluster the women. Surely this is sheer suicide—it seems as though the bold American had allowed himself to be caught and dragged from the saddle without a single attempt to avoid the deadly loops.

Such is the first thought of the spectators, for Mustang Sam had not moved a muscle until it seemed as though the lassoes were touching his person. Then, however, his action was too rapid for the human eye to follow, and the next moment he was a score of yards beyond the spot where the ropes fell!

Choosing his time well, Mustang Sam raised his left hand to his forehead, thus forming a taut line with reins and the lance-shaft from his head to that of Tornado, and as he felt the cold coils touch his arms, he touched his horse with the spur, at the same time dropping flat upon Tornado's neck, thus casting off the coils.

At the second leap of his noble horse, Mustang Sam wheeled abruptly; but it was not to await another attack. It was his turn to assume the offensive.

With a low cry he pressed forward, selecting one of the two subordinates for his first prize. Seeing his object, the Mexican, who was hastily drawing in and coiling up his lasso, wheeled his animal and fled at full speed, hoping to evade the American long enough to get ready for another cast. But as well might a rattlesnake hope to escape a prairie fire by flight, as for that stunted mustang to measure speed with the king of the desert!—bold Tornado. It was the wind racing with a flash of lightning.

A score of these marvelous strides, and then Mustang Sam bent low in the saddle; a flashing blade—and then the borderer laughed loudly, as he arose holding on high the ring end of the Mexican's lasso.

"Look out, Mustang—that comes t'other cusses!" yelled Hurricane Bill, warningly; but his partner was fully upon the alert.

With another ringing laugh he wheeled around and sped away at an abrupt tangent, so as to bring the second vaquero nearest to him, while Don Blas was fully two hundred yards away. The spectators fairly held their breath as they saw the scout dashing directly in front of the vaquero, who was preparing to make his second cast. But in his haste to improve this favorable opportunity, he fell into the very trap laid for him by the quick-witted Mustang. It seemed as though a single scord would carry the black horse beyond range, and this thought caused the Mexican to hurl the rope too hastily for accuracy, and the black coil was flying over the scout's head, when he flung up his stick and caught the rope.

Another cry broke from the spectators, and

Hurricane Bill half raised his revolver, with a grating curse. All believed that Mustang had been caught around the wrist while trying to cast aside the noose.

Guiding Tornado simply by the pressure of his knees and the swaying of his body, the scout dashed toward the vaquero, drawing in the rope hand over hand, until within twenty feet of him. Then, like a flash, he circled round the astonished horseman, who, ere he divined the object of his antagonist, was hurled heavily to the ground, together with his horse, whose legs were entangled in the coil. Then, with one sweep of his knife, Mustang severed the lasso, and uttered a second yell of triumph.

But at the moment he felt a snaky coil strike his head and breast, and knew that he was caught in the toils by Don Blas Cavello, who had galloped up just in time to avenge the downfall of his last vaquero. His lasso, true to its aim, passed fairly over the scout's head and shoulders, tightening around his chest, pinning both arms to his side.

Had not Tornado been so perfectly trained, had he not so fully understood every motion, touch and tone of his rider, the daring scout would have ended his race then and there, for Don Cavello wheeled his horse to flee, intending to pluck his antagonist from the saddle, and once unseated, Mustang Sam would have met with slight mercy at the swart Mexican's hands, for he had not forgotten the recent defeat he had suffered, and would risk the vengeance of Hurricane Bill, or even the just anger of his own countrymen at his breaking the rules of the trial, once he had the bold scout at his mercy. He immediately vowed not to check his horse while even the semblance of life remained in the body dragging helplessly at the saddle-bow.

But Mustang Sam uttered a single cry—not one of pain nor of alarm, though he was even then jerked sharply backward until his shoulders touched the croup of his animal. It was a signal that Tornado perfectly understood and promptly obeyed, wheeling on his heels like a pivot, then with one great bound loosening the cutting strain upon his master's body sufficiently to allow him to rise erect in the saddle.

Don Blas Cavello was spurring furiously on, listening thirstily to hear the dull *thud* of the body striking upon the sand as it was plucked from the saddle; but this sound did not come. Instead, the strain of the lasso across his thigh was lessened, and he quickly turned his head to glance back. A furious curse broke from his lips. He saw Mustang Sam sitting erect in the saddle, while the big black stallion was dashing toward him with wonderful speed, lessening the intervening distance with alarming rapidity. And, a strange fear thrilling his heart, Don Blas plied both spurs and cutting quirt, leaning forward as though to urge his animal to greater speed by the weight of his body.

Thrilling in every nerve, their eyes flashing, with bated breath the spectators watched the result. But Hurricane Bill replaced his revolver in its scabbard, and leaning back in the saddle yelled and roared with mirth at this ludicrous change in the state of affairs, until his horse, frightened by his stentorian shouts, began plunging and bucking with far more energy than ease to its rider, causing the scout to put his utmost skill in play to prevent being thrown.

But one thing astonished the spectators. Mustang Sam still galloped on with the rope around his body, not even having freed his arms from the horse-hair noose. What can it mean? Has he been injured by the violent jerk? If Don Blas should outrun the black mustang—and his animal is a good one, well known for both its speed and bottom—the scout may still be plucked from the saddle.

Hurricane Bill alone understands why his comrade acts thus. He knows that Mustang Sam has resolved upon teaching the sullen Mexican a lesson—a lesson that will be remembered as long as the breath of life remains in his body. Yet he means to teach this lesson without breaking either in letter or spirit the rules of the contest.

This is why he does not cast off the noose, why he does not make use of the keen knife in his hand to sever the rope; and this is the reason, too, why Tornado does not more speedily overhaul the fleeing Mexican. Don Blas is proud and self-conceited. His words and demeanor have evidenced this. He is in love with Carmela Munoz—that too is plain. Then what must be his feelings to fly like a very coward from a single man, with her bright eyes looking down upon his discomfiture? He was receiving a lesson—a bitter one.

As though he meant to end it all at once, Don

Blas drew his bright cuchillo, resolved to cut the lasso, though it went strongly against the grain.

"Hold!" shouted Mustang Sam, sharply, "remember the rules—you are to use no weapons but the lasso. Break them, and by the Eternal! I'll shoot you like a coyote!"

Don Blas hesitated, seemingly in doubt whether to brave the threatened shot. The delay was fatal to his hopes of escaping ignominious defeat. In answer to a low, peculiar cry, Tornado increased his speed, fairly flying over the ground, and ten seconds later was treading on the spotted mustang's heels. Then, for the first time since beginning the strange race, Mustang Sam touched the bridle-reins. Tornado rose into the air and bounded forward, alighting fairly upon the spotted mustang's haunches, crushing him to the ground like a blade of grass. At the same instant Mustang Sam severed the lasso and rode over the struggling heap, laughing loud and shrilly.

Hal was that an echo? It is long-drawn, shrill and piercing—but it lacks the tinge of mirth. Again! Now other sounds mingle with it—the terrified shrieks of women—the quavering shouts of men—almost drowned by the wild, blood-curdling chorus.

"Indians—Patchies, by the Eternal!" gritted Mustang.

And the scout was right. The Apaches were upon them.

CHAPTER III.

TWO BRAVE MEN.

THE Indians were upon them!

Swiftly approaching in a crowded mass with an irregular front, the soft sand muffling the thunder of their mustangs' hoofs, now yelling loud and shrilly with triumphant cadence, as though celebrating their victory ere a single blow was dealt. And why not? They were dealing with the condemned, despised race—their "slaves and providers"—the Mexicans. They are accustomed to see hundreds give way before tens during these forays. They seldom have to fight for their booty. More than one instance can be shown where less than a score of Apaches have charged upon and put to flight a full company of Mexican regulars. Scant wonder, then, that his war-party should charge so boldly, since they were fully the equal of the Mexicans in numbers.

It may be strange how the Apaches could have drawn so near, unobserved, since there was little or no cover within nearly two miles behind which they could have advanced. But the solution is plain.

The attention of all was riveted upon the two horsemen before them, after Mustang Sam's dexterous defeat of the two vaqueros. The report of a cannon could scarcely have broken the spell that held the spectators enthralled—much less, then, the faint rumble of hoofs that alone marked the swift advance of the prairie hornets. Besides, the "grand stand"—that occupied by the women—intervened; even had the Mexicans cast a glance behind them they could have seen nothing alarming.

Thus it was that the thrilling war-whoop of the Apache chief first told them of the impending peril. And then all was terror and confusion, dashing to and fro, shouting, cursing and praying in the same breath.

"Ye cursed fools!" yelled Hurricane Bill with angry contempt written upon his flushed features, as he dashed his huge Buck-skin into the midst of the trembling, half distracted crowd. "Think o' y'ur weemin—will ye let the Patchies work their will on your wives an' daughters 'ithout strikin' a single lick to save 'em from wuss than death? To h—l wi' sech or'ny cowards!"

And with this emphatic expression of his opinion for the "greasers," Hurricane Bill wheeled his horse and dashed around the end of the corral, holding a cocked revolver in each hand.

"To arms, friends—if we cannot save our dear ones, at least we will die defending them!" cried Don Munoz, suddenly overcoming his confusion. "Quick—to the weapons yonder! Holy Mother of Mercy grant us strength and skill to preserve our helpless loved ones from this terrible danger!"

The Mexicans are not necessarily all cowards, though their mode of life is enervating. In this case they only needed a leader—one to encourage and direct them; and when Don Munoz and his son, Luis, galloped to where their lances, swords and fire-arms were stacked beside the corral, they followed promptly enough. And as each man clutched the first weapon he could seize, a series of swiftly succeeding shots echoed from beyond the stand, mingled with wild

yells of rage and death-agony. They knew that Hurricane Bill was at work, and a loud cheer broke from their lungs.

When Hurricane Bill, "of the Cherokee Nation," dashed around the corral fence, he had only one thought; that the bright-eyed maiden whose beauteous face and soft tones had made such a deep impression upon his heart, was in danger of death—or worse. Without giving a single thought to the danger he himself was running, he galloped forward to place his body between her and the enemy. It was the act of a brave man, if not a prudent.

Fifty Wolf* Apaches, mounted on their small, cat-like ponies, their half-naked bodies painted with varied and significant emblems, brandishing their long scalp-bedecked lances, their firearms, their bows and arrows, yelling, whooping, screeching like fiends fresh-loosed from pandemonium for a holiday.

And yet Hurricane Bill dashed forward to meet them with outstretched hands clasping the revolvers he knew so well how to handle, his face sternly set, his blue eyes glittering like burnished steel, his long yellow locks streaming out from beneath the gray felt hat like the trail of a comet.

It was a thrilling—a glorious sight.

In amazement at this strange and unlooked-for move, the Apaches, with little cries of wonder and doubt, involuntarily pressed hard upon their reins, checking their snorting ponies. Almost simultaneously, Hurricane Bill uttered a sharp cry, and his well-trained Buck-skin halted instantly, standing like a statue of clay before the dusky, paint-bedaubed horde.

And then, so rapidly that mortal tongue could not follow the reports, the revolvers of the plainsman vomited forth their contents, carrying death into the closely-crowded ranks of the Apaches, emptying blankets and robes like magic. So swiftly did the reports succeed each other, that it sounded like one long roll of a tenor drum—as though the marksman was firing at random.

But such was not the case. Not a bullet left its chamber until one of the astonished Apaches was covered with the silver drop. And the eye that had guided the six bullets against the keen edge of Mustang Sam's bowie-knife a short time previously, did not fail the bold scout now. True and unerring as though guided by the hand of fate, the leaden missiles sped to their mark; and the air was rent with yells of death and agony, as savage after savage flung away their arms, dropping beneath the trampling hoofs, tearing and biting the hot sand in their last throes.

All this occupied scarce a score of seconds, and before the Apaches could recover from the astonishment into which his bold and unlooked-for attack had cast them, Hurricane Bill had emptied his second revolver, and then, with a shrill, taunting laugh, he grasped the loose reins, and wheeled his horse as though to seek safety in flight. This action seemed to break the spell that fettered the Indians, and they bethought themselves of their weapons, as they urged their mustangs over the bodies of their fallen comrades who were writhing in agony, or else still in the embrace of death. And muskets were fired, bows were drawn and arrows loosed. But still the scout dashed on, his wild laugh maddening the savages as the missiles whistled through the air above and around him, not one even brushing his garments or touching a hair of gaunt Buck-skin, who was now stretching out like a full-blooded racer entering the home-stretch. As Hurricane Bill dashed up in front of the stand on which were kneeling the pale and terror-stricken women, he uttered a shout of encouragement, just as the Mexicans, headed by Don Munez and Luis, rode around the corner.

"Give 'em glory!" yelled Hurricane, as he turned aside to prevent a collision. "I'll be wi' you soon's I kin load up. 'Member you're fightin' fer more'n life now—it's fer your wimmen!"

With these words he circled around, deftly removing the empty cylinders and replacing them with two others, already loaded and capped, which he took from his pocket.

"Strike home, men—strike for our women—not an Apache shall touch them while one of us can lift a hand in their defense!" thundered Munez, as he discharged his escopette, the bullet lodging in the breast of the foremost mustang, who fell, with an almost human scream of agony, pitching its dusky rider far over its head.

"Sock it to 'em, sports—work 'er up lively!"

howled Mustang Sam, as Tornado carried him like a flash into their midst. "Whoo-ooop! hyar's yur high-muck-a-muck from Ritter Creek—the squealin' painter of Stinkin' river—the untamed galoot as grows fat on powder-soup an' lead chow-chow—whoo-ooop!"

Bareheaded, a reckless smile upon his handsome features, a revolver in his left hand, the other clasping a heavy bowie-knife, Mustang Sam dashed down upon the Apaches as though utterly careless of life. Their arrows hurtled harmlessly past him—but they had not time to notch a second shaft ere he was upon them. His revolver vomiting forth death, his bowie-knife cutting the air in swift circles as Tornado carried him into the very midst of the enemy. And the noble stallion tore at the mustangs with his strong, white teeth, and struck out at them viciously with his fore feet, clearing a path for himself with wonderful celerity. And now the bold rider sways quickly in the saddle as a gleaming lance-point almost brushes his breast, and catching the shaft under his arm he snaps it short off, at the same time bringing down his heavy-bladed knife with resistless force. The Apache instinctively flung up his arm to ward off the blow, but the keen blade would not be denied, and the half-severed member was pinned tight to the warrior's massive chest, while the guard and full half of the horn haft was hidden in the quivering arm, so furious was the blow.

With one ineffectual effort to free his knife, Mustang Sam released it, and drawing a second revolver, opened a fresh fusilade, while Tornado, at a touch of its rider's heel, began kicking and plunging, wheeling swiftly here and there, beating back the infuriated Apaches who sought to close with the plainsman. And, his shrill laugh rising even above the horrible tumult, Mustang Sam plied his deadly revolvers, bending and swaying, at times fairly out of the saddle as he dexterously evaded the lance-points, hatchets and knives that were hurled at him by the maddened savages.

He was in his element now. His was a nature that reveled in danger—at no time was he so happy as when owing his life to the strength of his hand, the quickness of his eye—as when he was in the midst of death and bloodshed; he seemed a very battle-fiend.

The Mexicans charged boldly enough, for they were greatly encouraged by the reckless daring and astonishing prowess displayed by the border brothers, proof of which lay thick strewn upon the sands. And, when their constitutional dread of the Apaches—it may well be called this, since it is handed down from father to son, generation after generation; and to this day, one hundred Apaches can ride from one end of Mexico to the other without being attacked, so thoroughly have the Mexicans been cowed. Yet, when penned, they need only a leader to show fight—ay, and to fight manfully, too.

And so—after a hasty volley of escopette bullets which, badly aimed of course, did little execution—they charged home with leveled lances and drawn swords, led by Don Munez and Luis, who galloped side by side. And then ensued a confused, ever-changing yet always thrilling tableau of death. No one thought of keeping ranks, but singling out a foeman, lost sight of all else until death filmed the eyes of one or the other. And high above the shrill yells, the hoarse cheers and curses, the shrieks of pain and rage, the frantic, unearthly screams of the half-tamed mustangs as they tore and bit at each other, emulating the bloodthirsty fury of their masters, the clatter and clink of opposing weapons, the muffled thunder of the horses' hoofs, arose the clear, taunting laugh of the Mad Rider as he added to the list of deaths scored against his name. It was a wild, thrilling scene—one that a skillful brush might give a faint idea of; but what pen can delineate such a confused duel *a la mort*?

And then the Mexicans succeeded in cutting a bloody path through their dusky enemies—though it was more through the frantic efforts of the horses to extricate themselves from the fearful press, than any fixed purpose the rider had in view. Then, thoroughly warmed to the fray, they wheeled to charge the disordered enemy once more, and, by so doing, they faced the stand occupied by the ladies. A simultaneous yell of horror broke from their lips. A new horror threatened them.

A number of the Apaches had not paused to join in the fight, but dashing on, were even now clambering up the rude steps of the frail pavilion, yelling and exultant, brandishing their knives and hatchets that were soon to be redened in the life-blood of the helpless women

who cowered there, clinging together as if for mutual protection, too terrified to shriek.

A single scream, wild and piercing as that of the war-eagle—something that seemed like a flash of yellow light—and then the rapid detonations of revolvers.

It was Hurricane Bill, who had just discovered the purpose of the Apaches, and, having slipped the extra cylinders into place, he urged Buck-skin to the rescue. In as many seconds, two of the Apaches bit the dust; and then—leaping from the saddle without pausing to rein in Buck-skin, Hurricane alighted half-way up the flight of steps, in the very midst of the assailed Apaches.

And once more the daring plainsman gave an exhibition of his wondrous quickness of eye and accuracy of aim, never a missile missing its mark, nearly every one carrying death upon its swift wings. And as yet not a single blow had been aimed at him by the stupefied heathens.

But then one of them—a wretch whose back had been broken by a bullet—dragged himself by main strength over the step upon which he was lying, and rolled heavily against the scout's feet. Hurricane Bill was standing sideways, facing the two surviving braves, when he was thrown heavily down by the body striking his feet from under him.

This accident seemed to break the spell, and the two Apaches leaped toward him with uplifted hatchets. The plainsman could not regain his feet in time to meet and parry their blow. Death seemed inevitable, and a wailing cry broke from the trembling women as they closed their eyes to shut out the dread fate of their brave defender.

But like magic another figure appeared upon the scene, and there was a steely gleam through the air—then another of blood-red hue. Two strokes of a straight, heavy sword—two blows that, delivered by a stout arm guided by a practiced eye, carried death with them.

Sweeping the blood-stained blade around his head, the new-comer cried, in a clear, ringing tone:

"Ho! men—to the rescue!"

It was none other than Don Blas Cavello, who had hastily cleared himself from the struggle of his crippled mustang, and seeing the approaching Apaches, had run swiftly to where he had deposited his weapons when entering in to the contest of skill with Mustang Sam. Securing these, he hastened to join his men; for whatever might be his failings cowardice was not one of them. Just as he rounded the corral, he saw the savages clambering up toward the helpless women, and, in his mad passion for Carmela, he thought not of the peril he might incur, but dashed to her assistance. Hurricane Bill outstripped him, but he was just in time to foil the exultant Apaches, and, thanks to his trusty sword, save the scout's life.

"Bully fer you, sport—you're a brick!" cried Hurricane, scrambling to his feet. "But look out—hyar the varmints come, red-hot fer ha'r!"

The Apaches were indeed coming. They—like the whites—had witnessed the dare-devil act of Hurricane Bill, and their rage was raised to perfect frenzy as they saw the rapid slaughter of their comrades. With furious yells they charged, for the moment forgetting the foes they had just separated from, seeing only the man who had dealt such swift, deadly blows to their hopes. And close upon their heels thundered the Mexicans, led by Mustang Sam, whose voice rose above the tumult.

"Stick it out, pard—hyar we come—whoo-ooop!"

"For your women, men—think of them and strike home!" thundered Don Munez, using his bloody sword as a spur. "One stout blow, and the victory is ours!"

The Apaches dashed on as though they meant to ascend the pavilion on horseback, those in front with lances leveled at the two bold men who alone stood between them and their prey, the one swinging his sword in swift circles, the other sending bullet after bullet home with a cool steadiness that nothing could shake.

A peculiar, crackling sound was heard as the keen sword swept around, and half a dozen spear-heads fell clattering to the steps, severed clean from the stout shafts. Again the weapon whirled around, this time sinking deep through flesh and bone—for the leading Apaches had leaped from their animals and were now dashing up the steps. And the next moment the two men were borne down, though fighting with desperate energy, beneath the mad rush of the savages. And still other Apaches pressed on toward the now helpless women.

It was a scene of horror—the merciless hatchet and scalping-knife were at work—screams

* One of the grand divisions of the Apache nation.

terror were mingled with those of death-agony.

With a howl of inexpressible fury, Mustang Sam sprung from Tornado's back and plunged into the mass, using his terrible bowie-knife with all the skill and dexterity of its famed inventor. And for a few moments he was alone in the midst of his enemies, a number of whom turned upon him thirsting for his blood, for they recognized the man who had written his name so deeply upon their ranks.

Then Don Munez and his comrades appeared upon the scene and pressed the enemy hard, for they fought now more like maddened wild beasts than mere men, with the sight of their murdered loved ones for an incentive. And the Apaches began to sicken of this deadly, unceasing pressure. Only that they had been wrought up to maniacal frenzy, their heavy loss would have cowed them, long since.

Though so hardly pressed, Mustang Sam recognized the voice of Isidora raised in a cry for help, and caught a glimpse of her struggling in the arms of a brawny warrior, who appeared to be bearing her away. And then he fairly out-did himself. No eye could follow his motions—but ten seconds later he found himself free, he could not explain how. He had lost his knife but had snatched up a stout sword, then leaped down the steps, whistling to Tornado. He could see the Apache just dashing away over the plain, bearing the struggling maiden in his arms, three or four comrades riding behind him. And then, just as he sprung into the saddle, Mustang Sam saw the Indian raise his clenched fist and strike the maiden a cruel blow, to still her efforts to escape. Then Isidora lay like one dead in his arms.

Too full of rage to speak or shout, Mustang Sam plied his spurs mercilessly and thundered after the fugitives, unheeding the short whicker of remonstrance that came from the astonished Tornado at this unwonted usage.

Before a mile was covered, the noble black carried its master up to the Apaches, who were doing their best to escape. And then, with two sweeping strokes, that severed flesh and bones like so much snow, Mustang Sam found himself within arm's length of the savage abductor, who, seeing that flight was useless, attempted to plunge a knife into the swelling bosom, that just touched his chest.

But thought itself was not quicker than the motion of the Mad Rider, and a yell of agony broke from the savage's lips as his forearm fell to the ground. The keen sword had severed it at one adroit stroke. And the next moment Mustang Sam caught the drooping form of Isidora in his arms, and dashed forward, Tornado uttering a piercing neigh of pain. Glancing back, Mustang Sam saw the remaining Apache notching a second shaft, the first having penetrated Tornado's hind leg. Incumbered as he was with the just reviving maiden, and armed only with the sword, his revolvers being empty, there was only one course left; he must seek safety for his charge in flight, at least until he could prepare his pistols. Flight not only from the one Apache, whose comrades he had slain or disabled; the backward glance showed him over a dozen of the Apaches riding swiftly toward him. They had been defeated at the pavilion, and now, seeing this doubly-laden horse, had doubtless resolved to wreak their vengeance upon them.

At first Mustang Sam felt like laughing, knowing what Tornado was capable of, even when doubly laden, as now. But then he saw, or felt, that the black was running heavily, as though distressed. And he knew that the arrow had injured some of the tendons of his leg. Yet the noble brute thundered on. He would not succumb to anything less than death.

Yet, as mile after mile was traversed, Mustang Sam saw that the savages were slowly but steadily overhauling them. The result could only be a matter of time. Still, as the range of hills beyond loomed up nearer, he hoped to reach some point where he could make a stout fight for life, and make the victory a dear one to the savages. With this thought he carefully reloaded his revolver; a task easier than may be supposed, since he had only to bite off the end of the paper cartridges, then ram them home. While thus engaged, Tornado reached the hills, and entered a narrow pass. A wild cry broke from Isidora's pallid lips.

"Holy Mother of Mercy! we are entering a pocket!"

CHAPTER IV.

HURRICANE BILL PLAYS A "LONE HAND." Both Hurricane Bill and Don Blas Cavello went down before the mad rush of the Apaches,

and it seemed as though their lease of life had about expired. But such was not the case with Hurricane, at least. The thread of his life was not yet all reeled out.

To his other border accomplishments, Hurricane Bill added that of a "first-class rough-and-tumble operator." This was and is an accomplishment almost indispensable to a life along the border—in Kansas, Texas, and, particularly, the Indian Territory—unless one wished to go under with his boots on. Of the two methods of arranging such little differences as might chance to arise between friends, a "rough-and-tumble" was far more popular than knife-play or revolver-practice, because the argument was more protracted, affording the epicurean spectator ample time to digest the more brilliant points; while, as Long Ben Hackett told me in '67—"T'other way's over too durned quick. Three times now, hev I bin whar Hurricane Bill laid out his man, but, though I looked all I known how, durned ef he wasn't so lightnin' quick that it was all over afore I known who he was pepperin'!" But I digress.

Hurricane Bill now gave the Apaches a specimen of his rough-and-tumble science, not a little to their discomfiture. Just as they made the frantic rush, the scout had emptied his revolvers, and thrust them hastily into his breast to draw his bowie. But then his foot slipping in a pool of blood, he fell heavily, beneath half a dozen Apaches.

The shock was severe, but Hurricane Bill did not stop to ask whether any bones were broken. Putting his utmost strength into play, he rose half-erect, lifting the tangled lump of Apaches, and getting both feet well beneath his body. Then, ho!—though the effort seemed about to tear the members from their sockets—he wrenched his arms free.

The Apaches were trying to use their weapons, but their very haste and blind rage proved the scout's preservation.

The strokes and thrusts were widely delivered, and half were intercepted by clashing with some other weapon. The other blows were oftener received by copper-skins than white, though hot blood trickled from more than one wound upon Hurricane Bill's body. But in the intense excitement he scarce knew that he was touched—most assuredly he was not weakened.

His arms free, Hurricane Bill shot out his hard fists in swiftly-repeated blows, with a careless disregard of consequences, flattening noses, loosening teeth and making cross-eyed Indians, whose optics had heretofore been as straightforward as their owners' consciences had been crooked.

Confused and bewildered by these—to them—novel tactics, the Apaches fell or were knocked back, and then, finding himself free, Hurricane Bill flashed forth his bowie-knife, and cutting down the nearest savage with one swift blow, he dashed up the steps and plunged into the mingled mass of Indians and Mexicans.

A hoarse, howling yell broke from his lips as he saw Carmela struggling in the ruthless grasp of a wiry Apache, whose left hand was wreathed in her long hair, brutally pulling her head back, while a blood-dripping knife was quivering above the snow-white throat. And the same glance showed Hurricane that he could not reach her side in time to ward off the impending blow, for half a dozen bodies interwoven locked together in a death-grapple.

Thought was not swifter than his action. The heavy bowie-knife left his hand and cleaving the air like a meteor, sunk to the very hilt in the Apache's throat. A gurgling, strangling cry, and then the bloody weapon descended. But it was unguided. The Indian fell back, death-stricken. The knife, falling, barely grazed the cheek of Carmela, who knew not how narrowly she had escaped death, for she had fainted.

His arms seemed to possess the power of a weaver's beam, as Hurricane Bill cleared his way to Carmela's side, nor did he take time to select Apaches alone as the recipients of his blows—both red-skin and white went down before his mad rush. And then stamping upon the tight-clenched hand of the Apache as the quickest method of freeing Carmela's hair, the scout lifted her in his arms and leaped down into the corral below.

The terrified cattle were plunging to and fro, wrought to fury by the horrible admixture of sounds from above, and it was not without actual peril that Bill crossed the corral and scaled the fence of the smaller inclosure, from which, as will be remembered, all the selected bulls had been freed to furnish sport for the horsemen. Lightly dropping the half-senseless maiden into the—as he believed—place of safe-

ty, Hurricane Bill leaped down and dashed back to the pavilion to play his part in the last act of the tragedy. Just as he was clambering up the pavilion side, a begrimed and blood-stained face was thrust close to his, and a hoarse voice uttered:

"Where is she—what have you done with Carmela?"

"In the small corral—go look after her—you're wounded and can't do much fighting," promptly replied Hurricane, recognizing Don Blas in the questioner.

The Mexican uttered something more, but what it was Hurricane Bill never knew. It was at this moment that Mustang Sam called up Tornado and dashed off in hot pursuit of the Apache who had fled with Isidora.

Hurricane recognized the signal, and darted forward to see what it meant. A single glance told him how affairs stood, and he instantly whistled for Buck-skin, forgetting all else but the peril into which his loved partner was rushing. Not only from the four Indians whom he was chasing, but the Apaches—those who had survived the furious struggle—were all fleeing, mounting their horses in hot haste, pursued by the victorious Mexicans. Hurricane saw that Mustang Sam was riding direct toward the heart of Apacheria, the course that would almost certainly be followed by the retreating red-skins. And caught between two fires, the bold scout could scarcely escape capture or death, unless something turned up in his favor.

"But they can't have it all their own way—cuss 'em! I'll take a hand in this little game, myself! Cuss that Buck-skin—whar is the critter?" gritted Hurricane Bill, as he leaped to the ground and darted out upon the plain, still sounding his shrill summons.

It was scarce a minute, though to the impatient scout it appeared ten times that period, before the shrill whicker of Buck-skin was heard in reply, as the big horse came galloping around the corral. Emulating his master, Buck-skin had been giving the Apache mustangs a taste of his metal, and sundry wet and bleeding spots upon his long body proved that he had not escaped scot-free.

Hurricane Bill leaped into the saddle, shouting to the Mexicans to follow his lead. But he did not wait to see whether they obeyed or not. Giving Buck-skin a touch of the spurs, he darted, straight as an arrow, toward the cloud of dust which he knew hovered above Mustang Sam. Other eyes were riveted upon this same point, but Hurricane Bill gave them little heed. Mustang Sam was in danger, and only one thing could prevent the tall plainsman from sharing in that peril—death.

Occasionally touching up Buck-skin with the spur, Hurricane let the reins lie loose, both hands being occupied loading his revolvers. Biting off the folded bit of paper so he could pour the powder into the chamber, thus making a miss fire the next thing to impossible, he deftly plied the lever, ramming each ball securely home. Then slipping the caps upon the nipples, pressing each one down with the hammer, in less than five minutes Hurricane Bill was ready for work. And as he cast a keen glance around, he for the first time realized what a task he had set himself.

Far ahead was Mustang Sam, who had so dexterously rescued Isidora from the Apaches, but Tornado seemed to be running with unusual heaviness, like one utterly exhausted, every moment losing ground. Behind him, and about as far in front of Hurricane Bill, were scattered over a score of Apache warriors, each one urging on his pony with voice and heel eager to secure the scalp of the "big white brav." It was a novel scene; this triple race.

Hurricane Bill knew from their actions that they had just noticed him, and glancing back, he saw that the Mexicans had entirely withdrawn from the pursuit, evidently having had their fill of fighting. That the Indians were also aware of this fact, Hurricane now had ample proof. Half a dozen of the hindmost braves allowed the speed of their animals to slacken, while they looked at their bows and arrows. The blue of the scout's eyes deepened to a steely glitter as he quickly gathered up and knotted the long reins over Buck-skin's neck. But he gave no evidence of backing out from the trap that was being set for him. Mustang Sam was ahead, and Hurricane Bill had resolved to join him, if mortal man could. If necessary, he would have run the gantlet of the entire Apache nation.

Sitting firmly erect in the saddle, as though disdaining to bend his proud head, the plainsman urged Buck-skin on over the sandy waste with a low, encouraging cry, and nobly did

the yellow horse respond. The Apaches—six in number—after many glances over their shoulders, suddenly wheeled, dividing into two parties, the better to attack their bold enemy. Yelling like perfect fiends, they charged down upon the young plainsman, as though fearful lest the big horse should rob them of their prey by turning in flight. But in this they were soon set at rest. Hurricane Bill had not the slightest intention of flight.

Crack—crack! Almost together the two revolvers spoke, one to the right, the other to the left of Buck-skin's head. Their blow forestalled, and with such effect, the Apaches became flurried and discharged their arrows with an unsteady aim, only one of the four reaching its mark. Hurricane Bill coolly snapped the shaft, leaving the barbed head still sticking in his shoulder. And then, as he dashed abreast the Indians, his revolvers spoke again. A moment later he was speeding on after the main body, a low, taunting laugh coming back to the two un-hurt Apaches behind, who seemed stupefied by their easy defeat.

Hurricane Bill was now steadily gaining upon the Apaches, as well as upon Mustang Sam. He knew that gallant Tornado must have been injured, else, even while doubly laden, he would have shown the swiftest of his pursuers a clean pair of heels.

"He means to go under a-kickin'," muttered Hurricane Bill, as he saw how steadily Mustang Sam was making for the narrow pass in the range of hills. "It'll be hot work, but I reckon we kin pull off the odds."

There was still time for him to re-charge the four chambers he had emptied, and Hurricane hastily did so. Then, with a wild yell, he plunged spurs rowel deep into Buck-skin's sides and dashed forward like a human thunderbolt.

The faithful revolvers vomited forth their leaden contents, and then the big States horse dashed into the body of savages, knocking the diminutive ponies right and left, just as a Newfoundland dog will scatter a lot of yelping puppies.

"Hurray! Mustang—sock it to 'em!" yelled Hurricane, as he reached the narrow entrance, and disposed of one of the three savage horsemen who blocked up the way.

A ringing cheer replied, and the pistol-shot from within duplicate the tall scout's performance. The other Apache, seeing the huge Buck-skin rearing up as though about to crush both him and mustang to the ground, quickly slipped from his animal and darted out of danger. With a wild laugh of exultation, Hurricane Bill plunged forward, and the next moment found him beside Mustang Sam.

"Whoo-oop! I said I'd jine ye, pard, an' I didn't lie," laughed Hurricane Bill, as he wheeled Buck-skin so as to face the narrow entrance. "But why didn't ye run away from 'em? What's wrong wi' the blackie?"

"Arrow—feared he's bad hurt—but look out!"

"Let 'em come—they'll soon sicken of it," coolly replied Bill, cocking his revolver. "I could whip a tribe hyar, myself, an' wi' you—thar ain't red-skins enough this side o' h—l to faze us—not much!"

"Then I'll look to *her*—I dropped her under kiver, when I turned," added Mustang, leaping from Tornado's back and disappearing amid the bushes.

Hurricane Bill followed his example, so far as dismounting was concerned, and then glided stealthily forward under cover of the bushes until he could peer out upon the level plain. He saw the Apaches grouped beside the entrance, jabbering together excitedly. From the few words the scout could catch, he knew that the party was about equally divided in opinion, a portion urging an immediate retreat, the others wishing first to wipe out the three pale-faces. One of the party who had already been wounded several times, declared that it was rank folly to think of attacking such big medicine men in that place, where not more than two braves could advance abreast. With their medicine guns which never failed reloading, the pale braves could kill the Apaches one after another as fast as they could advance. There was no other way to reach them, except by the narrow pass. Therefore, he voted for a retreat. The Great Spirit was angry with His children from some cause, and it would be more than folly to tempt his displeasure further.

"I reckon it's time to put in my vote!" chuckled Hurricane Bill, as he covered one of the Apaches.

Again the terrible weapon spoke, unerringly. And then, with yells of dismay, the Apaches turned and fled in disorder, thinking only of

leaving the region that had been so fatal to them, that day.

"Take it cool, pard," laughed Hurricane, as Mustang Sam dashed up to his side. "Thar's no hurry. The fun's over fer to-day, anyhow. Whoo-oop! this is like old times ag'in!"

"She said it was a 'pocket,' but I reckon we'd better make tracks from this, as thar may be another trail hyar," muttered Mustang Sam, with unusual prudence.

Hurricane chuckled. He could give a shrewd guess at the cause of this sudden change in the usually reckless plainsman. Perhaps from sympathy—*quien sabe?*

Mustang now looked after Tornado. He found an arrow sticking in the noble black's hind leg, which, while not seriously injuring the tendon, had almost prevented that member from being used. A steady hand and keen knife soon removed the barb, and Tornado, as if to express his relief, uttered a shrill whicker. Mounting, Mustang Sam rode back a few yards and stooping lifted the form of Isidora Munez in his arms, then motioned for Hurricane Bill to lead the way.

And thus they took up the back trail. Isidora strangely subdued. She lay confidingly in the strong arms of the man who had dared so much to save her, though her eyes sunk beneath the ardent light that filled his black eyes.

CHAPTER V.

A FRESH COMPLICATION.

THAT ride of over two hours—for the scouts were not men to overtask their faithful brute companions when there was no absolute need of it, and both Tornado and Buck-skin had put in a heavy day's work—amply repaid Mustang Sam for the wounds he had received, and was one never forgotten in after life. Isidora was lying quietly in his arms, one hand resting lightly upon his shoulder, the other clasped in his broad, warm palm, her head reposing upon the Mad Rider's—now so subdued and tamed—breast, while her long, fringed lids sunk beneath his ardent gaze, a soft flush tinging her cheek. And Hurricane Bill—thoughtful fellow!—rode on in advance, whistling carelessly, rarely glancing back, and whenever he did turn his eyes in that direction, to assure himself that none of the Apaches were returning for revenge, Tornado and his double burden might as well have been in the moon for all that the tall plainsman saw.

There is no getting around it, reader, Mustang Sam had "fallen in love"—over head and ears—with Isidora Munez, though he had never laid his eyes upon her, never even suspected the existence of such a person, before that morning. Until then he had scoffed at the idea of any true plainsman tying himself down to a dull, humdrum life with any woman—as for him, he would die as he had lived, free as air. And he meant it, too—at that time.

But the first bright glance from Isidora's large, lustrous eyes, so plainly telling what she thought of the handsome, dashing cavalier of whom so many and marvelous tales had been told by such of the "neighbors," who had been in arms against the "heretic invaders," sent the hot blood coursing through his veins in a new and delightfully-embarrassing manner. And then the touch of her little hand—so soft, so caressing, almost; that drove the nail to the head—and the tragic scenes that followed, in which he had preserved her from a captivity worse than death, clenched it firmly. Mustang Sam knew that he was "corralled" at last—and he struck while the iron was hot, too. Just as he had entered into the sports of the Mexicans, just as he had plunged into the heat of the fighting, just so did the plainsman "make love." Even while fleeing before the Apaches, when he felt that death was almost inevitable—that their moments of life were numbered—he had bent his head and pressed his lips to hers, muttering that they could at least die together—that such an ending would be far preferable than to live on without her. And now, on the back trail that led to her friends, Mustang Sam repeated these words. And Isidora? She answered him very simply. She raised her head and pressed her ripe, juicy lips to his. At that moment Mustang Sam was in the seventh heaven.

Rather quick work, you say, reader? Admitted. In our cold clime, Mustang Sam would have been deemed "impudent—a savage, uncivilized;" Isidora, "forward, unmaidenly." But in Mexico they manage these things differently. It is a "land of fire"—and nothing is more inflammable than the hearts of the Mexican women. But there—I will attempt no

apology. I give Mustang Sam's courtship just as it actually occurred, and as *he* was satisfied, surely *you* need raise no objections.

"Yonder is the corral," suddenly observed Hurricane Bill, without turning his head until he felt assured the attention of his companions was attracted, "an' yonder come the greasers, lickety split. Reckon you'd better let the young lady take a seat ahind me, pard; 'pears like Tornado is a little tired."

"Not yet, Billy, old boy," laughed Mustang, his voice filled with a proud joy. "We've got a long trail afore us—her an' I—which won't end ontel one or both o' us goes under, an' I reckon we cain't begin it at a better time than now. Isidora, little one, this is my pardner, the best an' truest heart on the plains—you must love him a little, fer my sake."

"So—ho! that's the way the cat jumps, then! I knewed it—I felt it in my bones!" laughed Hurricane; but then, in a quiet, serious tone, he added: "Little one, good luck, an' God's blessin' go wi' you. You couldn't 'a' picked out a truer or better man than the one as is now a-holdin' you. He's the same, come rain or shine. Ef you cain't be happy wi' him, then you're in hard luck. An' as Sam sais, you must like me a little, too, fer he an' me is pardners—I mought say brothers, we cotton to each other so. But thar—your folks is a-comin' too fast, an' I won't say any more now."

"Not one word 'bout little one's sister, on Hurricane?"

"I reckon it'd sound better said to the sister," laughed Hurricane Bill, his cheek flushing. "Mebbe I'll ax little one to put in a good word fer me thar, ef I think thar's any chance—hello! what's the matter wi' them? What're they yellin'?"

The party of horsemen whom the tall scout had first observed as they rode rapidly toward the trio, from the corral, were now within earshot, and were uttering loud cries, though their words could not be distinguished as yet. A quick glance around dissipated the first thought, that an enemy had suddenly put in an appearance, and not a little puzzled, the two scouts rode on, until they were met by Don Munez and his son, who led the party of Mexicans.

"My child—my daughter—where is she?" gasped, rather than cried, the old Spaniard, his face ashen white.

"Here, señor, safe and unhurt," promptly replied Mustang.

"The Virgin be praised that *she* is saved! But Carmela—where is she?" added Don Munez.

Isidora uttered a little cry of apprehension. The two scouts interchanged rapid glances. Then Hurricane Bill replied, though his voice trembled, despite his attempt at self-control.

"Did you look in the corral? I put her thar out o' the way o' the fightin', an' then lit out to help Mustang hyar git back the lady—which we did, as you see."

"We looked in every place—she is gone, Carmela, my child—my poor child!" huskily muttered Don Munez, while Isidora and Luis added their lamentations to his.

"Thar must be some mistake—the Indians didn't kerry her off, or I'd 'a' seed somethin' to her. The hull kit tuck this trail—but thar was only *her*. Thar's some deviltry—whar's the greaser that my pard hyar rid down—the black one, dressed like a monkey, I mean!"

"He isn't here—I don't—" muttered Don Munez, glancing around upon his companions. "He must have fallen in the fight. I haven't seen him since."

"Then he went under after I left the corral—but hev any one o' ye noticed his karkidge—*are ye sure* he's dead?"

The Mexicans one and all slowly shook their heads. They did not remember having seen Don Blas since the fight first opened. They were too busy with *los Indios*.

Hurricane Bill said no more, but touched Buck-skin with the spur and galloped swiftly to the corral. Leaping from the saddle upon the fence he entered the smaller corral—the one in which he had left Carmela Munez. It was empty. Quickly, yet with a keen eye that allowed nothing to escape it, the scout quartered the ground, examining every foot of the inclosure. His discoveries were purely negative. There was no sign of a struggle having taken place, for though the sandy soil was deeply cut up and scored by the hoofs of the bulls the corral recently contained, this would not have prevented Hurricane from reading signs made afterward. There was no blood trace—nothing to tell of a tragedy having been enacted. Carmela seemed to have vanished into empty air.

At length Hurricane Bill turned to the party who had been anxiously awaiting the result,

being restrained by Mustang Sam from interrupting the scout.

"Now, gentlemen, when you answer me a few questions, then I'll tell you what 'clusion I've arrived at. Fast—who among you knows this feller you called Don Cavello?"

"I know this much," said Don Munez. "He, together with four men—his vaqueros, he said—stopped for the night at my house, five days since. He said he was a stranger in these parts, that he was on an expedition after a drove of horses, which he intended to drive to Santa Fe for a market. As I had a few hundred head I wished to dispose of, I invited him—as he appeared to be a gentleman—to make my house his home until after our little festa, when probably we could come to terms. That is all I know of him—but why do you ask?"

"Is any of his men hyar now?"

"No—none are here but neighbors—perhaps they were all slain—" hesitated Don Munez.

"One was—or badly wounded," eagerly interrupted a Mexican. "He lies at the pavilion, yonder, in great agony, praying for a priest that he may not die without absolution."

"Now, gentlemen," quickly added Hurricane Bill, "I'll tell you what I think. Mind, I've no proof, but 'spicion p'ints strong that a-way," and he told how he met Don Cavello, the question and his answer, and that he had noticed the Mexican running toward the smaller corral, as he dashed out to help Mustang Sam. "The lady is gone. Injuns didn't kerry her off—but somebody must 'a' did it—fer 'tain't likely she'd 'a' ran away herself, even ef she could 'a' got out o' that pen without help. I believe this man you call Don Cavello has kerried her off."

"But it don't seem—what reasons could he have?"

"Wait ontel we see this wounded man o' his'n. It'll go hard, but we'll git the truth out o' him. Mind—you ain't ary one o' you to interfere, no matter what I may say or do. I'm workin' fer the good o' your daughter, old man, but I won't stand no foolin'. The fust critter as throws as much as a straw in my way, down goes his apple-cart!"

"Hyar's one to back ye, pard," quietly uttered Mustang Sam.

"No one will interfere—but make haste! Think what she—my poor Carmela!—think what she must be suffering now, if it be as you suspect," groaned the almost distracted father.

"I do think, old man—I only wish I didn't think so much, fer we all need cl'ar brains now, ef we ever did afore," said Hurricane Bill, leading the way to the pavilion.

The wounded man was found lying with several others, upon the blood-stained floor of the pavilion, groaning with agony, a lance-thrust with several minor wounds marking his body. It was the second vaquero whom Mustang Sam had overthrown in the contest of knife vs. lasso. It was evident that his race was well nigh run, and Hurricane's pride revolted from threatening a dying man; but then, as he remembered Carmela, he steeled his nerves.

"Look here, my man," he said in the sufferer's own tongue, as he held a revolver before the Mexican's eyes while he cocked it significantly. "Do you want to live long enough to mutter a prayer, or would you rather be tied up to this post for me to split bullets on as I did with the knife this morning?"

The wounded man averted his eyes with a shudder of terror. A Mexican who will face cold steel in an enemy's hand without flinching will, in nine cases out of ten, show the white feather at sight of a pistol. Hurricane Bill had counted the chances closely.

"What have I—a dying man—done, senor?" gasped the vaquero, huskily.

"Not so fast—I am to ask the questions and you are to answer them, friend. But first, let me tell you what will be the result if you refuse. You know how I can shoot; very well. I will have you tied up to a post, then I'll pick off your fingers one by one. If this isn't enough, I'll break your bones one by one with bullets—but there. You understand me. If you are reasonable, and speak plainly, not only will we try to cure you up, but we'll send for a padre to give you absolution—"

"I will answer—will speak truthfully, no matter what questions you ask," eagerly muttered the wretch.

"Do, and it will be better for you. First, then—who is this man—your master—whom they called Don Cavello?"

With a spasmodic effort the vaquero lifted his head and cast a swift glance around. Then, with a gasp as of relief, he uttered:

"That was all a lie—he is the man you know—BLACK GARCIA!"

Had "the man in the moon" suddenly dropped into their midst, the little party could not have been more thoroughly astonished.

BLACK GARCIA—the Joaquin Murieta of Mexico; only it was Joaquin's blood-thirstiness without Joaquin's occasional gleam of chivalry, unredeemed by Joaquin's fearless daring and dashing gallantry. A cut-throat, a robber, a cattle-thief—woe betide the unlucky wight who fell into the hands of the Black Mexican. Death was certain—often preceded by tortures the most diabolical.

"Shet up!" sternly commanded Hurricane Bill, adding. "What was he after, here? Why was he in disguise?"

"He swore he must have the Senorita Carmela for his bride. He meant to carry her off to the retreat—"

"Where is this retreat? Mind what I told you about lying!"

"It's in the—the Lopo hills—any one can—ah!"

The wounded man ended with a hollow, gasping groan of agony, and rolling over upon his face, vomited forth great gouts of blood. Then, a convulsive shudder, a spasmodic action of the muscles. He was dead.

But he had told enough. Beyond all reasonable doubt Carmela had been carried off by the robber chief to his mountain retreat. There could be no other solution.

"Don't take it so hard, old man," said Mustang Sam to Don Munez, who seemed utterly broken down by this new blow. "We'll get your child back again, or go under in the attempt, won't we pard?"

"Yes—though the trail leads to—and back ag'in—I sw'ar it!" gritted Hurricane Bill.

"Now, then—at once—we are losing time here—quick! to horse!" cried Don Munez, springing up.

"You must let us run this machine, old man," coolly returned Mustang. "A man never made any thing yet by going off at half-cock. Both men and horses need rest—and then there's your wounded and your women. They must be taken care of. Pick out such men as you know you can depend upon, in a tight pinch. The rest can take the hurt and the women back to some place of safety. Then, after we take a bite, and give the horses a little grass and water, we can take up the trail, even if it is dark. You know where the Lopo hills are? Good! We can strike the trail there instead of following it all the way. Besides, the night will be dark—we'd have to wait until morning. So you see there'll be no time lost, after all."

"You're right—though 'tis hard to remain idle even for a moment, when we know my poor child is in such cruel hands," sighed the old man.

"The rascal will not be apt to bother her until he gets safe to his den; and be sure we'll not be far behind him. Indeed, we may overtake the thief."

Considerably cheered up, Don Munez and his son Luis set to work selecting the men who were to accompany them on the robber-chase. It was an easy matter to make up the desired number. Nearly every one of the Mexicans had been, in a greater or less degree, sufferers from the band of Black Garcia, and all were eager to strike a return blow, when led by such men as the two scouts, whom they believed invincible, after their performance of that day. The remainder were dispatched with the women and wounded to Don Munez's rancho, as being the nearest point of safety.

The two scouts sat aside from the remainder, silently eating some of the fragments left from the "banquet" that had been spread for the party at noon. This dispatched, knowing that Tornado and Buck-skin were rapidly filling their hides, the plainsmen filled their pipes, proving themselves *true* lovers of the "divine weed" by exhaling the soothing, fragrant vapor through their nostrils.

"Mustang, old pard," suddenly observed Hurricane Bill, with a sidelong glance at his comrade. "It's hard lines on me, your freezin' to this little one—though I'm boun' to say you've struck it rich. She's one o' them kind ye read about, she is! But then, it knocks me endways. You'll go git spliced—then what? She cain't traipse the plains wi' us—nur she ain't the kind o' property most any feller'd keer to leave ahind him. You'll settle down—that's what's the matter. Then whar's my pard? Durned ef I ain't up a stump!"

"You want me to give you a bit o' advice?"

"Well, mebbe 'twouldn't do no harm," hesitated Hurricane.

"It's quick told. You jest hitch onto a gal an' come 'long side o' us. We kin start even,

and then see which one 'll be gran'daddy fust."

"It's easy fer you to talk, pard—you've got the dead open an' shet on it—you're stuck wi' the gal, an' she's dead gone on you. But, honest Injun, now—how does it feel to be that a-way, Mustang—you know what I mean," added Hurricane, coaxingly.

"Well, pard, you kin ax the hardest questions o' any human critter I know. How does it feel? Look hyar. S'posin' you was a b'ar, wi' the tastes an' feelin's o' a b'ar. You come along an' you find a gre't big holler bee-tree. You climb up it, an' far off the bark and rotten wood ontel you can crawl inside. Thar you find the honey, all cl'ar an' pure, as ef it'd bin strained. You pitch in—the honey's mighty sweet—so's love. Then your feet slip an' you slide kersmack into the tree-trunk o' honey. It's so thick you don't sink at once. It's so sweet you can't leave off eatin' it, though, all the time you're afeard o' bein' sucked in an' did fer."

"You ain't afeard o' gettin' sucked in?"

"Not much—I was just statin' the rule," laughed Mustang.

"Then if a feller finds a gal who kin turn him cold or hot all over in less'n a wink, jest by lookin' at him—ef he feels jest 's though he'd like to lay down on the ground an' let her use his karkidge fer a doormat; ef he feels jest like he'd be satisfied to sit still an' look at her ontel the sun turned to a snowball—ef he feels like a powder kag stirred up wi' a red-hot poker whenever he sees any other he-critter a-lookin' at her; ef a feller hes all these symptoms, to onces, then—what think? Is he in love?"

"You bet—hit hard, too!" promptly replied Mustang Sam.

"I knew it! Pard, I'm corralled—I've got my gruel this time, sure!" solemnly uttered Hurricane Bill.

"You mean it, Billy? Then gi' us your paw—I glory in your spunk—I do so! We're in the same box, afer all!"

Hurricane Bill sheepishly clasped the extended member. He looked like a man attending his own funeral.

"Yes—but it's a crooked trail, afer all. Mebbe she couldn't see it in my light—I reckon she'd laugh at me, ef she knew what a softy I be. 'Tain't likely a fine piece like her'd take a shine to a rough varmint like me—I ain't cut out fer a lady's man—"

"Cheese it, pard—a honest man's a man, an' you're hafe a dozen rolled into one. But who is the gal?"

"T'other one—little one's sister—I thought you knew."

"Hurray! three to one—ef little one, you an' me cain't corral her, then we're less a'count then I'll ever b'lieve. Jest consider it settled, Billy boy—we'll run that race yit—shore! We'll soon straighten the crooks out o' the trail. We'll git her back fust—"

"I'll do it or bu'st somethin'!" gritted Hurricane Bill.

And thus for a couple of hours or more the border brothers conversed together, until Hurricane Bill felt nearly as hopeful and light-hearted as Mustang Sam.

The sun had been hidden from sight for more than an hour when word was passed to saddle up and prepare for the road, the animals having eaten and drank their fill. The heaven was clear, the stars shining brightly, giving light sufficient for the purpose of the party. They did not intend following the trail. If the words of the dying robber could be depended upon, Black Garcia would be found near the Lopo hills. By pressing on, they might reach there before him, when the rest would be easy.

CHAPTER VI.

THE "EVIL LAND."

THE MEXICANS are nothing if not superstitious. Though Hurricane Bill and his comrade had long been aware of this fact, it was disagreeably presented to them before the night was half gone.

When first setting out from the corral, the scouts had closely questioned their allies concerning the position of the Lopo hills, the distance and probable time it would occupy in making the journey. Somehow there seemed an extraordinary difference between the two last. Was the ground so very difficult, then? Yes, it was difficult—very rough and tangled. They must make a circuit of many miles—no one could cross the *Mal Pais* and live.

"The 'Evil Land,' eh?" interrupted Mustang Sam. "What makes it so much worse than the rest of the country?"

The answer came promptly, closely resembling a skirmish-line firing at will, each shot clutching the one preceding it, the whole forming a wild *melange* of the weird, ridiculous, tragic and fantastic that one finds nowhere to greater perfection than in Mexico. Marvelous legends were narrated of still more marvelous adventures and escapes; and while speaking, the narrator's voice grew more subdued, his sallow cheek pale, his great black eyes fill with a superstitious light as he glanced half-fearfully over his shoulders, like one who sees other shadows than those of night alone.

Many a stout man had entered the "Evil Land," either through ignorance or through foolhardiness. A few had emerged from it; but how? As miserable, idiotic wretches to whom death would be a blessed boon. The ruler of the Evil Land had touched their brain with his searing finger—had breathed his baleful breath upon them, shriveling their muscles, drying their brains, distorting their limbs, making old, decrepit cripples out of the young, hale man who, but a day or a week before, had been the pride of his village, the light of his mother's soul.

And of those who had never returned? Ah the answer was still easier. They had braved the spirit occupants of the Evil Land. They perished in their blindness. How? They were sacrificed. Their bones could still be seen. Some were fastened with invisible chains to the rocks—thus they had died. And their despairing shrieks for help only served to frighten away those travelers whose hearts were strong enough to take them along the edge of the Evil Land. And then, just at midnight, the scattered bones were reunited, each in its proper place, and, despite all the groans and sobs of the tortured spirits, the skeleton-band was forced to wait upon their masters—upon the demons of the Evil Land, who, for one hour, held wild, unholy orgies and blasphemous carousals in their natural temples of rock.

The true believers who are obliged to pass near this spot—this Evil Land—do so in fear and trembling, telling their beads, muttering their prayers and nervously handling their amulets and charms, to keep off the treacherous gnomes and evil spirits who hover around his footsteps, greedily waiting and watching for an unguarded moment in which they can assail him. And then cunning and seductive lures are cast in his way, artfully chosen according to his temperament and likings. A woman, lovely as a dream, whose eyes, lips, whose every movement and gesture speaks of love; perchance she appeals to his chivalry—she is a persecuted being, one who has terrible remorseless enemies, but whose friends have all vanished—unless he assists her, she is doomed. Others have been tempted with dazzling treasure—with heaps of bright, yellow gold and sparkling jewels of untold price. But woe unto those who hesitate for even one moment. He is lost—forever lost!

And so the word ran round. No sooner did one voice cease than another took it up. At first Hurricane Bill and Mustang Sam only laughed; but then they waxed impatient. As Mark Twain hath it—it was growing monotonous.

"Look here," at length cried Mustang Sam. "Don Munez, you are a man of sense. What does all this mean? Are you fellows trying to frighten us with these cock-and-bull stories, or is it just a way they have of cheering themselves? What are they driving at anyway?"

"Senor Musteno," gravely replied the Don. "We are on the borders of the *Mal País*. You have heard what has been spoken. Whether it is *all* true, I know not; but that a portion of it is, I can testify. To be foolhardy does not become a truly brave man. We have mortal enemies to face, who are strong enough to fill our hands with work. Then why add others? What can our arms of flesh avail against the spells and charms of evil spirits? Nothing. Then let us turn aside while there is yet time. When we are once fairly in the Evil Land, it will be beyond our power. We must then do as they command. And then who will rescue my child, my poor Carmela, from the power of this cowardly wretch?"

"They're all tossed wi' the same stick!" muttered Hurricane Bill, in a tone of ineffable disgust.

"Wait a bit," coolly said Mustang Sam, as Don Munez drew rein. "You say the Lopo hills is over yonder—an' this is the Evil Land that lays between us and it!"

"Yes—for twenty miles or more," was the quick reply.

"You want to go around, so's not to deesturb

these spooks. Now how far is it? How long will it take us to go round?"

"We have good horses—we can reach the Lopo hills by to-morrow night," slowly replied Don Munez.

"And you advise this—while your child is in the power of a black-hearted devil like this Garcia!"

"I speak for my comrades, senor," a little haughtily returned the Don. "For myself I know no fear—"

"Cut it short, Mustang," impatiently muttered Hurricane.

"I will, pard. Now look here, Don Munez. We—Bill and I—started out to rescue your daughter. If we hope do it—in time—we can't take a trip around the world, just because some one else takes a notion to tell fishy yarns about a certain bit of ground over which the trail leads. Our only show is to get there as soon or before this Garcia does. If he thinks the same as your men—and being a Mexican, it's likely he does—then he'll take the long way home. If he does, we can cut him off—if we take the short trail; not unless. If he *don't*, our only chance—a slim one it is—is to press him so hard that he won't have time to put any devil's play into execution. There you have it, short and sweet. You and your men can do as you please. As for Bill and I, we are going straight ahead, Evil Land or not. If your fears are stronger than your love for your child, you'll turn back; if not, you'll follow us," coolly added Mustang Sam.

"Senor Musteno, because you rendered my daughter a service, that gives you no right to insult me," haughtily replied the Mexican. Then adding, in a more even tone: "My son Luis and I will follow wherever you choose to lead. I was speaking for our friends, not for myself. I have been a soldier too long to greatly fear spirits, either good or bad."

"You hear, comrades," quickly said Mustang, turning to the Mexicans. "We have decided to go on. Let those who are *men* follow—let the cowards remain behind. You need fear no evil spirits while with us. Both my friend and myself are what the Indians call big medicine. 'Twill be a powerful spirit that we cannot quell."

"By a lead pill through a steel tube!" muttered Hurricane.

Mustang Sam said no more, but rode on; after a moment's hesitation the Mexicans overcame their superstition enough to follow after. But their pale faces, their trembling limbs and the nervous, fearful glances they cast around them, told at what an exertion of will.

The "Evil Land!" Truly the name was appropriate. A wilder, more gloomy and desolate spot could scarce be found even in that land of extremes and startling contrasts. Under the broadest glare of the noonday sun this region had a dismal, lonely, repellent look, that, beneath the faint, uncertain light of the twinkling stars was increased tenfold.

The tract was nearly thirty miles in width. What had originally been a valley, lying between two ridges or sierras, was now almost filled up to a level with the sierras, having been, at no very distant era, the scene of a volcanic convulsion. Near the center of this tract was the crater, considerably more than a thousand feet from edge to edge, and nearly one-third that in depth at the center.

The cracked and seamed lava around had given growth to a few stunted oak and mezquite trees. Prickly pear and weirdly shaped cacti abounded on every hand. Here and there were scattered huge blocks of lava, broken into strange, even startling shapes. No wonder the superstitious Mexicans frequently started and muttered a prayer, as the night-shadows played around these monstrosities of nature, for at times they seemed just about to leap forward and seize upon the daring mortals who had ventured into their sacred domains. And it was only the cool, undaunted demeanor of the two scouts that prevented them from turning to seek safety in flight.

The edge of the crater was reached with considerable difficulty; and then, pausing to breathe their animals, the men glanced downward, all curious, some awed.

The seamed and cracked sides of the vast basin were thickly covered with a stunted growth of dwarf oak, mezquite and cocoa trees. Far below could be seen a small lake or pond, its inky surface reflecting the stars above. The shrill croakings of frogs were mingled with the indistinct hum and buzz of many insects.

"Ay de mi! what is that?" suddenly gasped one of the Mexicans, pointing downward.

There was something gliding along the side of

the basin, rapidly approaching the party, without even so much as a rustle as it passed through the shrubbery. Then it paused and a low, wailing cry arose upon the night air—a cry that seemed mournful and plaintive, yet with a cadence threatening, fear-inspiring.

The Mexicans, giving free vent to their superstition, fell to praying and calling upon the saints to preserve them from the evil spirits; but not so the two plainsmen. They had heard similar sounds before, and, with native recklessness, they laughed loudly at the terror of their companions.

"Skeered at a chougar!" laughed Mustang Sam.

"Stiddy, old boy—stiddy, Buck-skin!" muttered Hurricane Bill, as he flung forward his rifle muzzle.

The beast was crouching for its leap. But the scout's hand and eye were too quick, despite the gloom that quite hid the double sights. At the sharp, peculiar report, the air was rent by a furious scream, and the cougar shot through the air, falling in a heap beneath the horse's feet, tearing and biting the ground in its death-agony, but beyond all power of doing harm.

Several of the terrified Mexicans were flung to the ground by their alarmed animals, where they cowered, still muttering their prayers. Hurricane Bill snorted with disgust:

"The or'nairest set o' cowards I ever see'd!"

"You won't say that, senor, when these men are confronted with Black Garcia's gang," shortly replied Don Munez.

"Hope not. Ef I hev cause—ef they kerry on *then*, like they do *now*, devil grill me alive! ef I don't waste a load o' lead on ev'ry pesky varmint o' them—so ther!" gritted the irate scout.

A few sharp words from Don Munez partially assured the Mexicans that the danger was past, but not even his directions, seasoned as they were with sundry hot oaths, could induce them to separate in pursuit of their mustangs, which had galloped away, alarmed by the well-known scream of the cougar. And the scouts were forced to secure the animals themselves, which they finally effected, with some little difficulty. The adventure had not served to strengthen their confidence in their allies.

"We'd better light out an' let these or'nairey imps slide—they'll do more damidge than good," uttered Hurricane Bill, disgustedly, as the party left the crater behind them, riding as rapidly as possible under the circumstances. "A jack-rabbit'd whip out the hull kit!"

"They kin stop a bullet as well as a white man, pard," was the quiet reply. "But they'll do better when they git face to face with their own kind. They made a pretty fa'r show wi' the red-skins, when they once got started."

Thus the long night wore away. It was slow, difficult traveling, but the party did not care to halt in such an uninviting spot, where there was no water for themselves or animals, and kept steadily on. The journey consumed more time than they had expected, however, and the sun was two hours high before they fairly passed the boundary of the Evil Land. Then they halted beside a small, sparkling arroyo, and kindling a fire, hastily cooked some jerked meat, while the horses greedily cropped the rich grass.

Hurricane Bill could not rest contented, and scaled one of the highest points around, taking careful scrutiny of the surrounding country. For some time he made no motion of discovery; but then, swinging his hat above his head, he came racing down the hill, calling aloud for them to saddle up in a hurry.

"They're over thar—four on 'em—ridin' along like they wasn't in a hurry. Quick—mebbe we kin overtake 'em before they hole, ef we're lively," he spluttered, greatly excited, as he flung the saddle across old Buck-skin.

Five minutes they were crossing the ridge. And a low, glad cry broke from the lips of nearly all, as they also distinguished the slow moving dots.

Then with deadly eagerness they pressed forward.

CHAPTER VII.

BLACK GARCIA UNMASKED.

FROM the first appearance of Hurricane Bill and Mustang Sam, that day had been any thing but a pleasant one for the gallant Don Blas Cavello, or rather Black Garcia, the mountain outlaw. And he had anticipated so much from it, that the awaking was doubly disappointing.

Good looking, if not positively handsome, when his evil passions lay dormant, well-form-

ed, with a smooth, insinuating address and almost inordinate vanity, he believed this day would complete the conquest of the fair Carmela's heart—complete, for he believed he had won the maiden's good graces. A skillful, graceful rider, an expert in all the national games, he was confident of proving a victor in most, if not in all of the trials. And then, after displaying the grace of his person at the *fan-dango* with which the feast was meant to terminate, he intended proposing. After all this, Carmela could not reject him. And, though not usually given to counting the cost, Black Garcia would rather have Don Munoz and Luis as friends than enemies. But he was—like many another unlucky wight—fated to experience the truth of the adage—"The best laid plans of men and mice gang aft agley."

He was beaten at every point by Mustang Sam, and finally humiliated—literally crushed to earth—caused to flee like a very craven before the bright eyes of the maiden whom he had so surely counted upon winning. And he had noticed the evident interest of Carmela in the dashing American, had intercepted the half-fearful glances of admiration the Hurricane Bill could not control. It was a bitter pill for him to have swallowed, and as he did not lack courage—as he afterward proved—there would probably have been a tragedy to mark the feast day, even had not the Apaches put in an appearance.

He fought desperately, carving his name in letters of blood upon the bodies of the Indians. He saw the rescue of Carmela, and then, his heart boiling over with hatred and jealousy, he cut his way through the *melee*, and saw Hurricane Bill returning after having placed Carmela in—as he believed—a place of safety. In that moment a bold plan entered his mind, and he lost not a moment in carrying it out.

Dashing across the corral he saw Carmela there half insensible, half-stupefied by the horrible scene in which she had been a helpless actor. She did not appear to notice Garcia as he passed by, and out at the bars. Here he caught a lasso from the pile upon the ground, and speedily secured one of the mustangs that pranced around, terrified, yet loth to leave the spot. While thus engaged, Black Garcia uttered several shrill, peculiar whistles. It was a signal well known to his men, and as he heard it answered, all doubt of success left the Mexican's mind.

Hastily lowering the top bar, he leaped over and caught Carmela up in his arms, promptly stifling her faint scream with his broad palm. The yells and confusion still told of a fierce struggle beyond—the cry of Carmela had not been heard. And with a hoarse laugh, the bandit spurred his horse to the leap. For a moment his heart fairly stood still as he saw two men rushing toward him—but then he recognized Juan and Orocho, his trusty men.

"Quick—get yourselves horses and follow me," he cried, as he dashed away, adding, in a monotone: "If those fools only keep up their fun for five more minutes—until I can pass the long sand-hill yonder, all will be well. Before they can guess the truth, I'll be far on my way to the hills—and once with my bold lads, let who will follow my trail, I care not! Less will come back—if any," and again the mountain outlaw laughed.

He did succeed in gaining cover behind the long ridges of sand, both he and his two men, before the Apaches began their retreat. Fortune was smiling upon him at last!

For hours the three horsemen continued their flight at a steady, rapid pace. All this time Carmela had not spoken a word, had scarce made a voluntary motion. She lay like a drooping lily in the bandit's stout arms, her head pillow'd upon his breast, his hot breath playing over her colorless cheek. She seemed in a stupor, though her eyes were half unclosed.

"So much the better," muttered Black Garcia. "It saves trouble and mayhap some hard feelings. I don't feel in the humor for soothing even her. Those cursed heretics—may Satan provide them both with close quarters this day! To think that I—I, Black Garcia, king of the desert, should have been so humbled by two beggarly Americans! But 'twas not done fairly—the devil himself aided them—they must have carried some charm that enabled them to stand before better men. And I—blind fool that I am!—forgot that I had broken my promise to San Ignacio. Only that *he* was offended, I could have laughed their charms to scorn. But I will double the offering—I swear it by my patron saint!—and when next we meet, the tables will be turned."

Until long after sunset the outlaw rode on

without halting. He did not enter the *Mal Pais*—he dare not. Like all of his countrymen, superstition held a firm place in his mind; whenever he glanced toward the region of evil repute, he muttered a prayer or called upon his patron saint. Nor were his men any bolder. To judge from their muttered words, the trio were saints—not an oath passed their lips; prayers took their place.

At length the party drew rein beside a small spring, where there was grass sufficient for their jaded animals. The men lighted their *husk* cigars. Food they had none. Carmela still seemed unconscious of her perilous situation. She seemed like one dazed, stunned, only half alive. The terror, the sight of her friends falling beneath the hatchets and knives of the terrible Apaches, the near approach of death to herself had numbed the faculties of her mind. She lay down upon the blanket that Black Garcia spread for her, and in a few moments more was soundly sleeping. It was just what she needed. When she awoke, it would be with a clear and unclouded brain.

Black Garcia did not sleep. He was too busy thinking over the events of the past day. His thoughts were bitter enough. He could not forget how signally he had been defeated, how deeply his honor—such was his thought—had been outraged by the insolent Americans. And, too, though he did not repent his action in abducting Carmela, he knew that it would make trouble for him. Don Munoz was the most influential man for scores of miles around, looked up to and honored by all his neighbors. He was brave, too, and energetic. He would not rest quietly under such a blow. He would soon be upon the outlaw's heels. While he lived, there would be no safety for Black Garcia.

Wrought up by these reflections, the bandit aroused his men and had the animals prepared for the road. Then he touched Carmela, who aroused with a little cry of alarm.

"You have nothing to fear—you are with friends, lady. I regret that your repose should be disturbed, but I fear there are enemies upon our trail, and we must seek safety in flight," quietly spoke the Mexican.

"My father—Luis—where are they?" faltered Carmela.

"Do you not remember? Think—try and recall what has happened," softly breathed the outlaw, in a tone of seeming sympathy.

"The Indians—I remember—I remember now!" gasped Carmela, in a strained voice. "But tell me—no—it can not be!"

"What can not be?"

"That they are—no, they are *not* dead—you are trying to deceive me!" cried Carmela, shrinking back.

"You wrong me, lady—but you will do me justice when you are calmer. You will see then that I am your true friend—your only friend now," quietly added Black Garcia. "But come—there is danger in remaining here. The Apaches are close upon our trail. We must ride hard if we would escape capture—and you can guess what that would be to you."

Carmela no longer resisted. The words of the man who called himself her friend, hinted that her father, brother and sister had been killed. At that moment she could think of nothing else. And she offered no resistance when Black Garcia lifted her before him and rode off through the night.

Had he been content to let well enough alone, it is possible that Carmela might have believed all, and he would have had no trouble with her until his retreat was gained. But Black Garcia really loved her—as truly as a brute like him could love—with a blind, unreasoning passion; and he wished to remove the memory of his disgrace, if possible. And so he told her of the marvelous deeds he had performed, of the many Apaches who had fallen beneath his prowess as he charged them single-handed to rescue her from their ruthless grasp. But he overaid the matter. She began to recollect some of the past events, and then, like a revelation of light, the truth flashed upon her.

"You are speaking falsely—you did not save me—'twas *he*—the noble American—he saved my life—not you!" suddenly exclaimed Carmela, raising her head.

Black Garcia was taken all aback. He attempted to stammer a denial, but she quickly interrupted him.

"Stop—do not stain your soul with more lies. You bade me remember—I do. I remember that *he* saved me, when the knife of a terrible Indian was at my heart. I remember that he took me to the corral, and placed me in safety. I remember that you came—that you carried me away on horseback. And I believe that you

spoke falsely when you made me think that my friends were all murdered!"

"These are hard words," began the mountain outlaw.

"But true—I feel that they are true!"

"Well, supposing they *are* true—what then?" angrily. "You are here in my power—I can do whatever I choose with you. If you are wise, you will not provoke me too far."

There was something in the man's tone that filled Carmela with a vague, sickening fear. She shrank from him, and had it not been for his tightening grasp, she would have leaped to the ground.

"Let me go—you frighten me!" she gasped, breathlessly.

"So—you change your tune very suddenly," laughed Black Garcia. "And yet I would be your best friend, if you would only permit. Men call me cruel and heartless, but *you* shall never have cause to do so, if you do not treat me cruelly. You shall be as rich and honored as any queen—you shall want for nothing that love or gold can give you—"

"What do you mean?" faltered Carmela.

"Well, I don't know as there is any use in wearing the mask any longer. You must soon find out the truth, anyhow. To you I have been Don Blas Cavello—in the future you must know me as Black Garcia."

A cry of terror broke from the maiden's lips, and she sought to free herself. But in vain, Garcia held her firmly.

"Bah! why do you act like a child? It can do you no good, and may work us both harm, for this is not the safest of trails. A single slip here would be death, and though I loved life before, I have double cause for loving it now."

Carmela did not cease her struggles, until Black Garcia, his temper fully aroused, angrily said:

"You must act more sensibly, or, in self-defense, I shall have to bind you, hand and foot. I didn't want to treat you harshly, for I love you dearly, but I *will*, unless you are quiet. You have sense enough to see that it can do no good. Then why act so? You are in my power—nothing can take you from me. Your happiness or misery rests with yourself. If you are sensible, all will be well. I will make you a good and faithful husband. If you are obstinate and self-willed, then I must tame you. But this you must understand. You are to become my wife—you cannot avoid that. It is your fate. If you insist, I will give you time to decide—a week or even two weeks. During that period, you will be treated with every possible respect—your every wish gratified. That is all, except giving you your freedom. Time for that after the honeymoon."

"I will die first!" proudly exclaimed the maiden.

"I have heard others say the same—yet they lived long afterward; yes, and were happy and contented, too. So will it be with you. You may not love me now—you may even hate me; it would be only natural that you should, after my plain speech. But I will make you love me. You are so dear to my heart that you cannot help it. A man can make any woman love him, provided he loves her truly. But there—I have said enough for once. I will give you a chance to think it over. Only remember. If you are not quiet, until we reach your future home, for your sake I must bind you. Please do not force me to be so rude."

Carmela made no reply. She knew that it was worse than useless. She was in his power, and to attempt resistance prematurely, would be futile. So she rode on quietly enough, outwardly; but oh! what a tumult was within!

In silence, save for the sound of their horses' hoofs coming in sharp contact with the rocks that thickly bestrewed the way, the little cavalcade moved on through the night, through the deep gloom that betokened the near approach of the day-god, through the somber gray light that gradually grew less heavy, changing to a golden hue, until the crests of the rugged hills beyond were bathed in the first rays of the new-born day's sun.

Black Garcia was not entirely at his ease. There was something in the expression of the pale face that rested in the hollow of his arm which he did not like. He began to believe that all would not be as plain sailing as he had at first thought. This was the face of an obstinate woman—of one who would not be easily driven against her will. But then he reflected;

"Bah! what matter? A short time more and we will be safe with my brave men—and once there, not a thousand enemies could rob me of her. There will be only her will to break, her hatred to conquer—and surely I am man enough

for that! In one week she will become reconciled; in two weeks contented—and in a month from now she will adore me and believe me a very god!"

And in this manner the outlaw reassured himself, while pressing steadily on toward his retreat. Why such haste? He knew that no man could follow his trail through the night; and even if they could, 'twould be impossible for them to have made better time than he had since leaving the scene of the interrupted feast. Yet he glanced often toward the Evil Land, as though expecting something disagreeable.

Yet he believed his identity was unknown to the Mexicans. He had told a cunning story and had worn the mask adroitly. There was nothing to connect him with the notorious Black Garcia in their minds. But supposing they should have suspected the truth, they were ignorant of his retreat.

Despite this belief, Black Garcia cast many an uneasy glance toward the *Mal País*. He was looking for enemies. Not for Don Munoz and his neighbors. They were his countrymen, and, like himself, devoutly believed in the mysteries of the haunted place. They would never dare attempt to cross it—particularly during the night. But those cursed heretics—the Americans—they had not religion enough to believe in these things. Besides, they were in league with the devil—at least they bore charms provided by him, else how came they to stand against stout men of the true faith, only yesterday!

It was for Hurricane Bill and Mustang Sam that Black Garcia was looking. And at length he was rewarded—most disagreeably. A tall figure standing upon a sharp peak, clearly outlined against the sky; and, despite the intervening space, Black Garcia recognized his rival, the yellow-haired plainman.

A furious curse broke from his lips as he saw Hurricane Bill wave his hat. He knew then that they had been discovered.

"Oroche," muttered the mountain outlaw, to the lighter of his followers, "you saw that? We have been followed—but it will be a trail of death to them! Go—ride as fast as your horse can carry you, and do not draw rein until you reach the retreat. Send the women and animals into the hole, and have the bridge ready for instant removal. Tell the men to prepare their weapons for hot work, and to await me at the mouth of the pass. We will teach these dogs that it is dangerous work to press the tiger to bay. Go—quick!"

Oroche obeyed without a word. Juan looked as though he would have liked to share the mission, as he glanced back and saw the pursuers dashing recklessly over the rough ground, but he dared not stay as much. Black Garcia had little mercy for cowards, when in his own band.

Carmela gave vent to a little cry of delight, as she realized the truth—that friends were in sight and working hard to rescue her. Black Garcia laughed, bitterly, sneeringly:

"You are overjoyed—instead, you ought to weep," he said, coldly. "There are your friends—all that the Apaches have left alive. They are fools—blind, unreasoning fools, else they would have remained at home, giving thanks for their escape. Instead, they come here, following me. But they rush on death. Take your last upon them. In half an hour more they will vanish from your sight forever. In an hour, not one of them all will be alive. Take your last look, I say."

"They will rescue me—I can recognize the bold Americans," murmured Carmela, a bright light shining in her eyes.

"This is a double trail. To us it means life and happiness. To them it means death and annihilation. See yonder!" and the outlaw uplifted his finger, with a mocking laugh. "That black speck—and there are more—dozens of them! Do you know what they mean? They are vultures. They know that a feast will shortly be prepared for them. I will be their provider. And they will whet their beaks on the bones of your father, your brother—and your insolent heretic lover!"

Carmela shuddered and turned faint at heart.

CHAPTER VIII.

STRINGING THE TRAP.

BLACK GARCIA laughed shrilly as he glanced back, so confident did he seem of complete success and victory. There was a devilish glitter in his black eyes, his white teeth shone from beneath the heavy mustache; exultation was written on every feature as he tossed back the long, jetty hair that had fallen over his face, and once more gave his attention to guiding the mustang along the rough, difficult trail.

And, despite the knowledge that friends were within sight, straining every nerve to reach and rescue her, the words and demeanor of the mountain outlaw were like a cruel weight upon the maiden's heart. As his exultation rose, so her hope sunk.

"Juan," suddenly cried Black Garcia, addressing the second *vaquero*, "Juan, as soon as we pass the point yonder, do you ride at full speed. See that the men are all ready. But don't let them pass the mouth. There is where we'll set the trap for these blind fools behind us. Remember—and go now—they can't see you."

Juan freely used the spurs and dashed away over the broken trail with a speed and adroitness that bespoke the really skillful rock-rider. Black Garcia proceeded more leisurely, turning to catch one more glimpse of the pursuers, before turning the sharp angle that would hide them from view.

Then he, too, plied the spurs, though he knew that he would have an abundance of time for arranging his trap, though, as the crow flies, the party led by Hurricane Bill and Mustang Sam was not more than a third of a mile distant. But intervening was a broad, deep crevasse. The horse did not live that could leap it. The only way was to make a detour. By turning to the right, half an hour would suffice to regain the broken route; if the other, those taking it would be thrice that period of time.

The doubly laden mustang was dashing rapidly along a narrow pass, dark, gloomy, oppressive, despite the bright sun that filled the heavens. It was only at broad noonday that the golden rays ever lighted up the bottom of the pass, and then only for a couple of hours.

The pass was some forty feet wide, at the base, but fully two-thirds of this space was occupied by boulders, large and small, through or over which scarce a footman could have wound his way, unless at a snail's pace. These boulders had evidently fallen from the cliff above, at different times, and such was the quantity it seemed strange the pass was not entirely blocked up. So it would have been, but for the hand of man. This pass led to the stronghold of Black Garcia and his band of mountain outlaws.

For fifty feet the sides of the pass rose without a break, save here and there a few rough projections or points, by which a strong, active man might possibly reach the shelf above. This shelf or ledge was some three yards in width, and from below, appeared entirely choked up with fragments of rocks. Yet behind those an army might have found cover; that is an army such as one expects in the desert. Above this ledge, at shorter intervals, were two more, presenting the same appearance. In the hands of fifty stout-hearted, resolute men, this pass could be held against ten thousand enemies.

Ten minutes carried Black Garcia and his captive through the pass, and he saw his men gathered around the mouth, armed to the teeth, though atoot. A peremptory gesture and sharp word checked the cheer they seemed on the point of giving, and then the outlaw chief quickly gave his commands.

"Oroche, to you I leave the arrangements. Divide the men and station them on both sides of the pass. You need not go far down—there's not more than a dozen of them in all. But remember—not one must escape. Every man must be killed or taken prisoner. If a single one escapes it will spread the story over the whole country, and then we would have to scatter and seek some other retreat, if not disband for good. Go now—or stay," he suddenly added, as if struck with a second thought. "You six—" and he called the chosen men by name, "will station yourselves at the narrow pass beyond here. It is barely possible that some of the rascals may break through, and if they once get among the deviles yonder, would give us trouble to find them. Remember, all who come through here, are enemies, and I look to you to give a good account of them. Go now. I'll be with you in time for the fun."

Carmela, half-senseless, had listened to the words of the outlaw chief with a heart full of dread. She had sense enough to see that a deadly trap was being laid for her friends, from which escape seemed impossible. Yet she could do nothing—nothing but wait and pray.

Black Garcia rode along, passing a narrow rock bridge upon each side of which yawned a deep, gloomy pit, their sides rough, jagged, a fall down which could be nothing less than death. This was the place where Black Garcia had directed the six bandits to lie in wait for rascallers.

A short distance further, the Black Garcia dismounted. As his feet touched the ground, Carmela would have fallen, only for the outlaw's

supporting arm. The long ride had benumbed her limbs. With a short laugh, he lifted her and strode forward, pressing through a dense clump of bushes that apparently grew close to the face of a high cliff. All was darkness, the most intense, as the leafy screen closed behind them, but the bandit strode on with the firm step of one who thoroughly knew the ground. They were within a cavern of some sort, as Carmela knew from the peculiar echo that came from the bandit's spurred boots.

Black Garcia stood still, uttering a sharp, prolonged whistle. In a few moments a dim, star-like point of light appeared before them, and advancing slowly, the outlaw met the bearer of the torch, an old woman. She held the torch downward, and revealed a narrow plank that evidently crossed some abyss. Black Garcia crossed with a steady foot, though the elastic bridge swayed beneath the weight, and Carmela grew dizzy as she glanced down into the blackness. The depth she could only surmise. No mortal vision could reach the bottom by that faint light.

The old woman led on in obedience to a few muttered words, and then paused, holding the light above her head. They stood within a small apartment that seemed cut out of the solid rock by the hand of man. It was fitted up in a style fairly luxurious, considering the circumstances. A carpet was upon the stone floor. A low pallet was in one corner, covered with white linen and embroidered blankets. Various articles of clothing hung along the wall, together with a guitar and mandolin. All this was revealed as the old woman touched the torch to a brightly polished silver lamp that was suspended from the ceiling.

As Black Garcia deposited Carmela upon the pallet, he cast an approving glance around, and then turned with evident satisfaction to note the manner in which his captive regarded her new quarters. But Carmela said nothing. She lay motionless upon the pallet, more like a dying person than aught else. And as he noted her pallid, haggard features, the heart of Black Garcia smote him painfully. But 'twas only for a moment. He turned and gave a few hurried directions to the old woman, bidding her treat the lady as her future mistress, and then, after a lingering glance at the pale features of Carmela, he retraced his steps to help his men defend the pass.

Only pausing to renew his instructions to the six men who guarded the stone bridge, Black Garcia strode on, and making use of some rude steps hewed in the rock, mounted to the first ledge, where he found that Oroche, his lieutenant, had faithfully followed his directions. And then they waited for the coming of their intended victims.

A cry of exultation broke from the pursuers as they first caught sight of the three horses and their burdens. Though at a considerable distance, they could still see that one animal bore a double load, and the light drapery that could only be worn by a woman was proof positive that the object of their long, arduous ride was at length fairly before them. A brief dash—so they all believed—would suffice.

Mustang Sam, by virtue of Tornado, led the way; close behind him came Hurricane Bill upon old Buck-skin, who proved himself nearly as good a rock-climber as the black stallion. And as they rapidly neared the fugitives, the scouts looked to their weapons.

Tornado paused abruptly; with a peculiar snort. He stood upon the very brink of a canon hundreds of feet in depth, while the further side was nearly forty feet from where the black stallion stood. And then the fugitives vanished from sight. The pursuers interchanged glances. The Fates seemed working against them. While they were endeavoring to surmount the barrier, the outlaw might escape them, after all. The hard rocks retained faint traces of even a horse's passage. Black Garcia doubtless knew this region thoroughly. If he was too far away from his stronghold, he could easily hide in some of the thousand and one snug coverts around. And knowing this, a groan of bitter rage and anguish broke from the lips of Don Munoz.

"The devil couldn't leap it!" muttered Hurricane Bill.

"Not hyar," replied Mustang Sam, promptly enough. "But that may be other places whar we kin cross."

"But he'll git off while we're lookin' fer it."

"Not much! Here—let the best lasso thrower stand forth," he added, addressing the Mexicans in Spanish. "Knot one riata to another. The rest of you separate and ride up and down

the edge of the canon, looking for a place where we can cross or leap our horses over. Work lively—and when you find it, fire a single shot. That will tell the other party where to go."

He was obeyed without a word. Then Mustang Sam turned to the Mexican who had remained with him.

"Can you rope yonder big bowlder?" he said, indicating a rock that lay on the other side of the canon, several yards from the edge of the abyss.

"Si, señor," was the prompt reply, as the Mexican carefully gathered up the double lariat, and then made the cast.

He did not belie his skill. The noose settled fairly over the bowlder, and a dextrous twitch secured it firmly. Then he spurred back his mustang until the taut rope nearly flung them both to the ground.

"That will do," said Mustang Sam, dismounting. "You can go now. Take my horse and follow one of the parties, tell them that I've gone to follow the woman-thief, and that I will lay a plain trail for them. Let them follow it until they overtake me, or hear from me, in some way."

The Mexican rode rapidly away, leading the unwilling Tornado, who did not relish this being taken from his beloved master. Mustang Sam passed the stout riata around a huge bowlder and knotted it firmly. Then, with the aid of a stout stick, he twisted up the slack until the lasso was as straight and stiff as a bar of iron. Grasping the rope, the scout boldly swung over the chasin, crossing hand over hand with the speed and ease of a professional gymnast. In ten seconds he was standing on the further side of the canon.

Reaching the point where Black Garcia had disappeared from sight, Mustang Sam rapidly picked up the trail, at the same time leaving plain indications for his comrades, in the crushed and broken twigs of the bushes, or by kicking up a portion of the sandy soil that lay in scattered patches between the rocks.

But he was not forced to do this long. The trail entered the narrow pass, and after marking the entrance plainly, Mustang Sam glided on rapidly, not more than ten minutes in the rear of Black Garcia.

The scout abruptly paused and then sunk down behind a ragged bowlder. The enemy was in view. He could distinguish a number of human beings scaling the almost perpendicular walls of the pass. They were Black Garcia's men, going into ambush. Not dreaming of any such plan as the scout had put into operation, they believed themselves safe from observation for at least another half-hour, and so paid little attention to what was going on in the pass.

"So—he's holed at last!" muttered Mustang. "Means fight, too. A pesky mean place—but that's open ground beyond. A quick dash'll do it. Once we git thar, we'll hev them in a trap. They cain't get down unless we let 'em, which I don't reckon we will—faster'n we kin pick 'em off 'th our six-shooters."

Satisfied at length that he had learned all he could without danger of discovery, the plainsman adroitly retreated, keeping well covered until out of sight of the ambushed outlaws. While thus engaged he heard the report of a gun, and knew that a crossing had been found at last.

He had not gone far beyond the entrance of the pass, when he caught sight of his comrades, and quickly signaled them. His gestures were understood, and the party came up rapidly. Mustang Sam had determined what to say, and did say it, simply and forcibly. He told them that the outlaws were in a strong position, and any hesitation upon their part would be almost certain destruction. Their best plan was to make a sudden dash and reach the open ground beyond the pass. This once gained, they held the result in their own hands.

There was no need for further speech. The Mexicans, with one voice, declared that they would follow Mustang Sam to the death. And he, though a little doubtful whether their courage would be proof against the test of ..., knew that it was best to strike while the iron was hot, without giving their fervor time to cool.

"Be sure an' keep close at my heels, pard," he hastily muttered to Hurricane Bill, as they rode toward the pass that was destined to be the scene of a tragedy. "Don't stop to burn powder on 'th we're in open ground. Them cusses hev got pikes o' dornicks ready to roll down a-top o' us, an' we cain't afford to lose Tornado or Buck-skin. You won't forget?"

Hurricane Bill replied by a look; but no more words passed between the friends. They were

now within the pass, and a few moments more would bring them to the end. Mustang Sam, who had assumed the command, as it were, rode slowly along. He had marked well the ambush and could tell at just what point actual danger commenced. He felt confident that the outlaws would not open fire until their prey was almost directly beneath them, for fear those left by the first volley might seek safety in flight. The two scouts rode along quietly, as though fully at ease, but, despite his directions, Mustang Sam could see the Mexicans casting anxious glances at the ledge above and before them. They possessed little of the peculiar courage such an advance required. And Mustang knew that he must make the dash speedily, if at all.

With a shrill, piercing yell, he gave Tornado loose rein, and darted forward like a flash, closely followed by Hurricane Bill. The Mexicans, echoing the yell, also charged boldly, seeming to gather resolution from their own voices.

"Fire! let not one escape!"

It was the voice of Black Garcia, rising high above the yells, the clattering of horses' hoofs, and accompanied by a loud report as he aimed at Hurricane Bill. A clap of thunder appeared to shake the rock hills to their very foundations, and a sheet of smoke veiled the ledge above. Then, set in motion by sturdy, nervous arms, the jagged bowlders thundered down the almost perpendicular sides of the pass with resistless force, raising a thick fog of dust and chalky particles that effectually shrouded the horrible scene below. But it could not cover the wild shrieks of mortal pain and terror that rose upon the air.

Then came the rapid, sharp detonations that can come only from a revolver, and a wild curse of rage broke from Black Garcia's lips as he found it came from the open ground beyond. He yelled to his men to follow him, and then recklessly descended the side of the pass by means of the rude steps.

But before he could reach level ground, the firing had ceased, and as he rushed toward the rock-bridge, he saw that it was occupied only by the dead or dying. And just disappearing around the point were the forms of two horsemen. Raging like a baffled tiger, Black Garcia ordered a dozen of his men to press on in pursuit, nor to return without bringing in the scalps of the daring plainsmen.

With the others, he turned toward the pass. It was a horrible, sickening sight that met his gaze—but his fiendish heart exulted in it.

The dust cloud had lifted on the air. The forms of men and horses lay thick in the pass, still and motionless in death, or else writhing in acute agony. The blood-stained bowlders that almost choked up the pass had done their work thoroughly. Nearly all of the rescuing party had been stricken down by these terrible missiles. With a devilish smile the mountain outlaw contemplated his work.

A cry of bitter rage directed his gaze toward a man who was pinned to the ground by his dead horse having fallen upon his leg. It was Don Munoz, who, with drawn sword, was cursing the false Don Cavello, branding him as a coward, a craven renegade.

With a cool dexterity, Black Garcia struck the weapon from the old man's hand, and then ordered two of his men to remove the horse. This was promptly done, and the father's hands deftly secured behind his back.

"You are my guest now, Señor Don Munoz," said the outlaw, mockingly, after bidding his men put the wounded wretches out of their misery with a dagger-thrust. "Rely upon it, you shall be treated magnificently. But first—have you no curiosity to behold my bride—your daughter?"

Don Munoz glared at the sneering villain in speechless rage.

"Allow me to support you," said Black Garcia, wound his arm around the Don. "Can you walk a short distance? The pretty Carmela will be delighted to welcome you to her own home. I regret that her brother should unluckily have stood in the way of one of these rocks. But—blessed be those who die young!" and the outlaw laughed harshly.

Don Munoz could endure no more. He staggered and then sunk a lifeless weight in the bandit's arms. For once in his life the strong soldier had fainted.

Terrible anxiety, want of rest, pain, the sight of his dearly beloved son lying a mangled corpse at his feet, added to the taunts of his captor, were too much. With a curse, Garcia set about restoring him. He had a particular use for Don Munoz.

CHAPTER IX.

STEALING A MARCH.

How did Hurricane Bill and Mustang Sam manage to escape from the trap that proved so fatal to their comrades? Partly because of the outlaws' inferior firearms and still worse marksmanship, but mainly owing to the speed and surefootedness of Tornado and Buck-skin. Not a bullet had touched them—indeed, only two of the party had been killed by the outlaws' volley, the remainder having fallen beneath the resistless bowlders—and their horses carried the two scouts beyond reach of the rocky avalanche.

"It's all up, thar!" exclaimed Mustang Sam, with a rapid backward glance, as they cleared the mouth of the pass.

A sharp report sounded in his ear, and turning quickly, he saw that their road was blockaded by half a dozen Mexicans, who stood upon a narrow trail that passed between two deep pits. There was no other way to pass, except over this rock-bridge. To retreat would be death. And knowing this, Hurricane Bill had sent a leaden missile of death just beneath the stiff brim of the head of the Mexican's sombrero. This it was that had so startled Mustang Sam.

"Whoop-oop! Sock it to 'em!" he yelled, recklessly, as his repeaters added their voices to those of Hurricane.

The bridge-guard was taken completely by surprise, and, though they managed to discharge their clumsy escopettes and unwieldy horse-pistols, 'twas but a waste of powder, for not one among the six thought of taking aim. On the other side, the scouts were not men who made a practice of wasting ammunition; *they shot to kill.* And by the time the forty yards of ground was passed, there were only two of the outlaws upon the bridge unharmed.

With a wild yell, Hurricane Bill spurred his big Buck-skin forward. The two outlaws, terror-stricken, utterly bewildered, clumsily endeavored to wheel their animals to seek safety in flight, but only succeeded in counteracting each other's efforts, their animals colliding.

At this moment Hurricane Bill came up, and, touching Buck-skin with the spur as he lifted him with the reins, hurled his big States Lorse fairly upon the small mustangs Lestrode by the bandits. It was like a wedge entering a log of straight pine. The single stroke was sufficient to drive the wedge clear through, splitting the log asunder.

And the reckless plainsmen laughed as they saw the ill-fated bandits go over the edge of the rock-bridge to meet their death upon the jagged rocks below.

"Hurray fer our side!" screamed Mustang Sam, as he too dashed across the bridge. "But lis'en—the varmints is comin' lickety-split! They're too hefty fer us, pard, out in this open ground. Reckon we'd better light out."

"But the gal—" hesitated Hurricane Bill, though he knew that Mustang was in the right; they could not hope to gain anything by fighting the whole of Black Garcia's land.

"She must be some'ar ahead o' us. Mebbe we kin pick her up as we ride along, an' then we kin take to the hills. But s'posin' we don't see her now—how'll it help her fer us to git rubbed out? We must cache on 'th night. Then we kin play Injun on the varmints. See?"

Hurricane Bill did see, and knew that his partner was in the right. Mustang Sam, keeping a tight rein on Tornado, ready to halt or wheel instantly, should such need arise, led the way at a rapid pace across the open ground, following a well-beaten trail that wound around an abrupt spur. This brought them into view of a large herd of mustangs, feeding in a circular valley, well covered with rich grass, owing to the springs that bubbled from beneath the gray rocks.

"Stampede 'em!" yelled Mustang Sam. "It'll blind our trail an' give 'em somethin' else to do besides follerin' us."

Hurricane Bill promptly followed the example set him, and the two scouts charged up on the cavallada, yelling, hooting, screeching like drunken savages, emptying their revolvers into the crowded mass of snorting, terrified animals. Their success was complete. The frightened mustangs broke and dashed away at top speed. Nothing short of death could have checked them just then. And still riding hard upon their heels, the plainsmen thundered across the valley and entered a rocky pass, knowing that it must be a thoroughfare else the mustangs, who must be well acquainted with the lay of the ground, would have chosen some other passage.

The correctness of this reasoning was soon proved, for the scouts soon found themselves entering another valley, or inclosed basin, surrounded on all sides by high, rocky hills.

They abruptly drew rein before entering the soft soil. Now was the time to lose their trail. A narrow stretch of shale running along the foot of the hills, afforded means for this, and dismounting, they carefully picked their way over the flinty fragments until, reaching a narrow passage that extended almost at right-angles with their course, they entered and trotted briskly along the hard, rocky floor. The sun, though now considerably past the meridian, served as their guide, and when fully satisfied that they were beyond risk of discovery, unless the outlaws should search every rod of the hills, the borderers halted in a little niche and prepared to take the rest they really stood in need of, while arranging their further plans.

Black Garcia drew a long breath of positive relief when he found that there was nothing really dangerous in the faintness of Don Munez. Not from any sense of awakened humanity; he had something in view in which the Don might be made use of. After that—well, as he muttered beneath his breath—dead men have still tongues.

Hastily calling to one of his men, they bore the body across the rock-bridge and into the cavern, finally depositing the Don beside Carmela upon the pallet. The maiden, recognizing the begrimed and blood-stained features, bent over her father with a piteous wail. She believed him dead.

"No, lady," hastily interposed Black Garcia. "He is alive—he has merely fainted. See—he stirs now."

The outlaw spoke the truth. With a faint sigh, the Don slowly opened his eyes. For a moment he seemed like one petrified; then a cry of wild, delirious joy broke from his lips as he recognized the features of his child, and sought to clasp her in his arms. But the stout thongs that held his wrists prevented, harshly recalling the peculiar circumstances under which they met.

"I leave you here with your charming daughter, Don Munez," said the bandit chief. "I must go look after my men. But remember, if you attempt to leave this room, you will be stopped by the guards and then confined separate from your child."

The hours rolled on. The majority of the band was ranging the rock-hills, searching for the two Americans and collecting the stampeded animals. Black Garcia awaited their return with what patience he could summon, hoping, almost praying that his men would bring in the scalps of the two plainsmen. He could not feel at ease while they lived. They appeared more than mortal men. They must be in league with the evil one himself, to perform such wonderful feats and make such marvelous escapes.

Time dragged slowly enough to the father and daughter. Carmela had released her parent's hands, but they could do nothing more. Escape unaided was impossible, and they both believed Don Munez to be the sole survivor of the attacking party.

Toward sunset, Black Garcia visited the captives. He had been drinking freely, and showed its effects quite plainly in his flushed face and unsteady step, as well as thick, rapid utterance.

With a mock-polite salutation, Black Garcia sat down upon the rock-floor close beside the entrance, and ostentatiously laid his bare cuchillo upon his lap. Then, with fingers a little less skillful than usual, he rolled up a husk cigarette and lighting it, leaned carelessly back against the wall, leering at Carmela through the curling waves of smoke, evidently believing he was making an impression.

"Don Munez," he began, "I have been having quite an argument with my honest men about you. They ask why I did not put a lead pill through your head. I said because you were a friend of mine—"

"A friend of yours—I?" scornfully interrupted Don Munez.

"The time may come when you will be glad to call me such—when you will beg and implore your friend to save you, Don Munez, proud as you are," angrily retorted the bandit. "Best guard your tongue. I am not blessed with the patience of a saint. Do you know who I am? I am a *king* here—my will is *law*. I can give you life or I can give you death, by a single word. And death, too, preceded by such tortures as the most ferocious Indian never even dreamed of. So, I repeat, take heed what you say."

"What is your will with me?" demanded Don Munez.

"That is more like it. Be respectful, and your life will be the longer. My will? Well,

'tis easy told. I wish you to take your choice between life and death."

"Hush, Carmela! You must speak plainer, sir. Under some circumstances life would be even worse than death," quietly responded the Mexican.

"None but a fool would say that. Life is life. Death is—well, whatsoever doubts you may have on that subject will be solved in a very few hours, unless you show your good sense by making a treaty with me. It is this: I am in love with your daughter, the fair Carmela. Nay, hear me out then you can speak. I have loved her for some months. Where or how I first saw her, does not matter now. It is enough that I left my bold band and came to your rancho with only one object in view—that of winning her, as a man of honor should. Well, you know what caused me to adopt another course—those accursed Americans—chosen children of the devil! Aided by the charms of their foul master, they cast shame upon my head. He with the yellow hair cast a spell over her—see, her cheek flushes even now! How could I fight against his infernal arts? In only one way; and that way I followed.

"Don Munez, I told you I loved your daughter. She is here, wholly in my power; I wish to make her my wife. If I have your consent and hers, I will send for a priest. If you refuse—which, for your own sake, I hope you will not—you can count your remaining hours of life upon the fingers of one hand. Now you can speak—I am listening," said Black Garcia, with drunken gravity.

"My daughter, do you love this man?"

The shudder of abhorrence that ran over the maiden's frame was answer most eloquent.

"Good! if you had said yes, I should have felt tempted to curse you. Listen. You come of a pure-blooded, honorable race. You must not be the first to stain the name. Better death than dishonor. And as for you, Black Garcia," added Don Munez, turning to the outlaw chief, who sat as if petrified, "take this for your answer. No child of mine shall ever mate with a thief, renegade, cutthroat. As for myself—it matters little whether I die now or a year hence; by the hand of man, or the claws of a foul, cowardly coyote."

The biting, contemptuous words of the old man seemed to completely sober the bandit chief. Though his face turned a sickly gray, and his hand closed nervously upon the haft of his cuchillo, he answered never a word, but turned and silently left the apartment.

Though Don Munez felt assured that the words he had spoken had sealed his fate, he gave all his attention to comforting Carmela, seeking to strengthen her for the coming ordeal. He reminded her that she held life or death in her own hands, since the bandit had not deprived her of the stiletto which, like all the women of her race, she carried in her bosom. He threatened her with his dying curse in case she should yield to the threats or persuasions of Black Garcia.

Meanwhile Black Garcia and his lieutenant, Oroche, were settling the details of the "grand spectacle" they were to give the bandits that night. 'Twould be prime sport, this torturing their most determined and bitter enemy, Don Munez, who had often endeavored to exterminate their noble band. And then, leaving his captain to entertain himself with the big gourd of mezcal, Oroche strode away to arrange matters for the novel *festa*.

Despite their anxiety, the remaining hours of that day were terribly long and trying to the captives. Anything was better than this sickening suspense, and it was with positive relief that Don Munez heard the tramp of feet approaching his prison. It was Black Garcia and two stout men.

At a gesture they flung Don Munez down and bound him hand and foot, then lifting him, they bore him away. Black Garcia, with a drunken leer, passed an arm around Carmela's waist and followed. For a moment she felt tempted to strike him with her dagger, but then all else was forgotten in anxiety to learn what fate was in store for her father. She was not kept long in suspense.

Passing through the leafy screen, Black Garcia guided her around the point of rocks. Directly before them was a small bonfire. Beside this was planted a stake. Around were scattered piles of fagots. And to this stake, after stripping him to his drawers, the bandits were binding Don Munez.

Carmela sought to shriek aloud, but could not. She seemed stifling, and only for the supporting arm of Black Garcia, she must have fallen to the ground. The bandit chief laughed loudly,

as he leaned against the point of rocks. Don Munez turned his head and beheld the couple. At first glance it seemed as though Carmela was holding the outlaw in a voluntary, loving embrace.

"Carmela—remember my words! My curse rest upon you forever if you submit to that cowardly murderer!"

"Ha! ha! old man, you are a poor, blind fool, unfit to live. I offered you life and freedom, but you chose death for yourself and disgrace for your daughter instead. There is no retracting—it shall be so. You shall die a death of horrible torture, while you can soothe your last moments by reflecting that this same night your daughter becomes mine," tauntingly cried Black Garcia.

Yet he it was who was the "poor, blind fool." Even as he scoffed and mocked at the brave old man, the shadow of death was creeping over him. His thread of life was all spun—was even then about to snap. His minutes, his seconds of life were counted.

"Come, darling," he added, in a thick, maudlin tone that he meant should be intensely loving, as he turned to face Carmela. "This is no place for hearts like ours. The scene that is about to take place is too tragic—let us go to our bridal chamber—ha! ha!"

Carmela appeared like one stupefied. Her face was ghastly pale. Her eyes were fixed in a stony stare; her hand was cold as ice. Yet she mechanically yielded to the outlaw's arm, which still encircled her waist. And thus, in seeming affectionate embrace, the couple so strangely assorted passed around the point of rocks and was hidden from view of those beside the bonfire.

"You are wise, my queen, to yield to the inevitable," said Black Garcia, a little indistinctly, for the fiery mezcal was beginning to clog his tongue. "You are very wise. I am a rising man—you, as my bride, will be a rising woman. I am king here—but listen. I mean to get up a *pronunciamiento*, and then I will be dictator—"

"You don't say!" gritted a deep voice, as a black figure uprose before the bandit chief, seemingly from out of the very ground. "I reckon you're goin' down 'stead o' up!"

A sinewy hand clutched the outlaw's throat—a keen-pointed blade was driven once—twice to the very hilt in his chest.

"Look to the gal, pard; don't let her squeel. Make fer the horses, hot foot. I'm goin' to lift this varmint's ha'r!"

A second figure glided away with Carmela in his arms, one hand over her lips. The other stooped over the fallen outlaw for a moment. When he arose, something black dangled in his hand. It was the scalp of Black Garcia, the mountain outlaw.

CHAPTER X.

"E U C H E R E D!"

THRUSTING the ghastly trophy into his sash, Mustang Sam glided after Hurricane Bill. Together they passed the rock-bridge and entered the mouth of the pass that had been so fatal to their comrades. But there was one lying in ambush for them now. Even those of the bandits who had been detailed as guards, were now with the rest around the old prisoner, unrebuked. Wonderfully bold and daring as they undoubtedly were, the Americans would not dare interfere with nearly two-score men. So reasoned Oroche. Black Garcia was no longer capable of acting as chief. And thanks to this eagerness of the sentinels to witness the "sport," the two scouts had managed to creep up within earshot, just in time to rescue Carmela.

A burst of wild laughter came from around the rock-spur. The sport was evidently commencing. Carmela gave a start, and shuddered convulsively. The sound restored her life and energy.

"Save him—save my father!" she gasped.

"You first—then him," quickly replied Hurricane Bill.

"No—'twill be too late, then. I will not leave without him. See!" and Carmela writhed from the plainsman's arms, and uplifted her right hand, grasping a small but keen stiletto. "I will not leave him here to die alone. He gave up his life for mine. I will not desert him now. Let me go back—attempt to stop me, and I will drive this weapon to my heart. Quick—stand aside if you are men!"

"She's talkin' durned nonsense, pard, but she means it, plum through. You jes' let me do the talkin'," muttered Mustang Sam, then adding: "Lady, you are with friends whose only object is to rescue you, even as we did your sister. She is alive and well—you shall join her very

soon if you will only trust and have confidence in us—”

“I know you now—you are the great, the generous Americans! Save him—save my father. You can—you will not refuse—I will ask it upon my knees!”

“Mustang, that’s no use talkin’—we’ve got to do it. I’d dive down the kenyon o’ the Big Red ef she was to ax me. I’m goin’ to bring the old man out or bu’st somethin’. You take her to the horses. ‘F I don’t meet you in ten minutes, you mount an’ make tracks, fer I’ll be rubbed out. You kin tell her then what I told you yest’day—I mean ‘bout corralin’ me so peert.”

“Kinder easy, pard—you don’t give me the shake like that. I reckon I’ll hev a finger in the pie.”

“You will rescue him, then?” tremblingly asked Carmela.

“We’ll try it, lady,” replied Mustang Sam. “It’s long odds, but they are only cowardly coyotes, after all.”

“Ouf! we’re burnin’ daylight,” muttered Hurricane. “They’ll rub the ole man out while we stan’ hyar palaverin’. Let’s git to work. Which is it? afoot or on hossback?”

“Critters’ll be best. An’ then we kin sprawl out so the greasers’ll think we’re fifty, ef we use our lungs judgmatical. Then we’ll need the critters to kerry off the old man.”

“Back to the horses, then. Tell her not to squeal, pard. I’d only make a cussed fool o’ myself ef I war to try.”

Mustang Sam hastily told Carmela what they intended doing, and then Hurricane Bill raised her once more in his arms. A curious thrill ran through his frame at the contact, and his head grew light. But this was only momentary. He darted down the pass swift and sure-footed as a mountain goat.

“Off wi’ your buck-skin,” uttered Mustang Sam, as they reached the animals. “We must muffle the critters. Cut up the pieces, while I tell the lady what’s up.”

Hastily but clearly the borderer told Carmela the plan they had decided upon, bidding her hope for the best. She was to remain at this point until their return. At their signal—a sharp whistle—she was to stand ready to be lifted on horseback.

“I will remember. You will find me behind this rock,” said Carmela, with wonderful calmness.

Mustang Sam said no more. Hurricane Bill had cut up his buck-skin hunting-shirt into squares and strips, and the scouts now deftly muffled the hoofs of their animals, tying the leather firmly in place. Thus, even upon the rock, the animals’ hoofs gave out no echo.

Then, with a parting caution to Carmela, the two scouts rode forth upon their perilous, dare-devil mission. Two men braving two score.

“Give the varmints a taste o’ your repeaters, pard. Yell like the devil on a tare. But keep a eye on me. I’ll cut the old man loose, and then give a whistle. Then you must come an’ pick him up. You’re stronger’n I be. I’ll keep the varmints back, while you’re doin’ it.”

These were the only words that passed between the border brothers.

As they neared the point of rocks, they drew their revolvers. Then, yelling like demons, in a dozen different tones, their pistols speaking rapidly, carrying death and dismay into the close-crowded mass of outlaws, the scouts charged recklessly.

A revolver in each hand, his teeth fixed upon the reins, Hurricane Bill hurled the big Buck-skin fairly into the midst of the astonished bandits. At every report, a man fell, dead or mortally wounded. Buck-skin, in obedience to the spurs that pricked his flanks, plunged and reared, flinging out his heels vigorously, tearing and biting at the dusky forms around him like a mad beast.

Excited, though obeying every touch of the rein, Tornado halted beside the stake, unheeding the flames that scorched his feet. Fortunately the torch had just been applied, and the twigs were not fairly ignited. Mustang Sam bent in the saddle and with two powerful slashes, severed the cords that bound Don Munez to the stake. Then sounding the shrill signal agreed upon, he urged Tornado forward and plunged into the melee.

It was not a fight. The bandits, for the most part without arms, a great many of them half-stupefied with liquor, seemed totally incapable of either self-defense or fight. Not a hand was raised against the Americans. Not a blow was struck save those they themselves delivered. It was a massacre.

Hurricane Bill promptly obeyed the signal. Wheeling Buck-skin, he crushed through the

crowd, and reached the stake just as Don Munez sprung out of the fiery circle.

“I’m a fri’nd, old man—give us your paw an’ up yer come!” shouted Hurricane Bill.

Don Munez understood and recognized the plainsman, and grasping the proffered hand, he swung himself up behind Hurricane Bill, who shouted:

“All right, pard—*puckachee!*”

Buck-skin darted around the point of rocks with his double burden, and then thundering over the rock-bridge, entered the pass. Mustang Sam only paused for a parting blow, and then followed his comrade, overtaking him just before reaching the point where Carmela had been left. Sounding the agreed-upon signal, it was promptly answered, and the next moment Carmela was in Mustang’s arms.

“Whoo-oop! we eunched the varmints that time!” yelled Hurricane Bill.

“Right you be, Billy; ‘twas a neat job. But I don’t reckon we’re through wi’ the game yet. Lis’en to that!”

Even as Mustang Sam spoke, a loud yell came echoing down the pass. It seemed as though the outlaws had suddenly recovered their senses—as though they now saw how sublimely they had been duped. They had only seen two men—the daredevil Americans who had escaped the death-trap in the pass. Yet over a dozen of their men were dead or disabled.

Riding close side by side, Don Munez and Carmela clasped hands for a moment. It was like the dead returning to life. Even with that yell echoing in their ears they were happy. For the moment they forgot the death of Don Luis.

“Lead on to the place whar you crossed over, pard,” said Mustang Sam. “Once over the kenyon, I reckon we kin give these varmints the slip, s’posin’ they foller us.”

The doubly-laden animals could make but slow progress through the rock-strewn country. The trail was winding and intricate. The riders were ignorant of the best route. They had only passed over the ground once, and then in too great haste to take particular notice. The bandits would have them at frightful disadvantage if they should follow.

“Hyar’s the place, I b’lieve,” at length uttered Hurricane Bill, reining in his horse close beside the canon.

“It’s time, too. I kin hear the varmints comin’ down full split, now we’re still. But sure this is the place?”

“T looks like it. We had to jump our critters over,” returned Hurricane, peering anxiously forward.

The opposite side could hardly be distinguished, owing to the gloom cast by the rocks and shrubs beyond. It was a moment of painful suspense. From behind came the unmistakable sounds of hot pursuit; the bandits having rallied, were burning for revenge.

“Look out thar!” sharply cried Mustang Sam, as he touched Tornado with the spur.

The noble brute rose into the air like a bird and then alighted safely upon the other side with his master and Carmela. There had been no danger in the leap, yet the courage displayed by Mustang Sam was none the less on that account.

“Come on, pard. Buck-skin kin step acrost,” laughed Mustang Sam. “Tain’t ten foot acrost it.”

“A moment later, Buck-skin alighted beside Tornado.

“Mustang, you ride on wi’ her—keep as nigh as you kin to the trail we foller in comin’ hyar, so’s I’ll know whar to look fer ye. Never you mind what you hear back hyar—you jest tend to her.”

“What’s up now, pard?” demanded the Mad Rider.

“You hear them varmints? They’re headin’ straight fer this crossin’. Ef they pass this, we’re goners. They know the lay o’ the ground an’ we don’t. I’m goin’ to keep ‘em on t’other side fer a bit; ontel you git a fa’r start.”

“I’ll stay an’ help—”

“No ye won’t, nuther. I’m runnin’ this outfit, just now. You take her and *puckachee*. Git—I mean business.”

Though with evident reluctance, Mustang Sam turned and rode away, after first handing Don Munez one of his revolvers. It went against the grain sorely to leave his partner to meet the enemy alone, but he knew that Hurricane would not be crossed.

“You’re going to fight them, *señor?*” asked Don Munez.

“Yes—goin’ to keep ‘em from crossin’, ef I kin. You kin help—jest fire at ‘em whenever you ketch a chance, an’ keep jumpin’ around in

different places. I don’t reckon we’ll hev very hard work to keep ‘em back long enough to let Mustang git away safe. Likely they’ll think we’re all hyar. But now lay low. Do jest as I do.”

The outlaws trotted briskly up to the crossing. From his covert Hurricane Bill could quite plainly distinguish them. And leveling his revolver, he fired twice in rapid succession. Don Munez imitated his example. The outlaws were most effectually surprised. Nor was this lessened when Hurricane Bill, while rapidly emptying his revolvers, shouted in a loud voice:

“Charge, lads—charge an’ they’re ours! Work’er up lively, boys! Whoo-oop!”

With cries of terror and dismay the Mexicans broke and fled, the wild war-cry of Hurricane Bill sounding in their ears long after they had vanished from view. Then, with a pleasant laugh, the scout turned to Don Munez.

“That’s settled. Now fer to join our fri’nds. I don’t reckon we’ll hev any more trouble afore day, anyhow.”

“We owe you our lives—I and my child!”

“Thar—don’t say no more. I wasn’t workin’ fer nothin’. I reckon you’ll hev to pay me a big price fer what I’ve did, when we git through all right,” interrupted Hurricane.

“I’m rich—I will give you half of all I am worth—”

“I wasn’t speakin’ of money, old man—but thar. Let it drop fer now. Jump up ahind me. We’ll hev to ride right peert to ketch up wi’ Mustang, I reckon.”

“Not much you won’t, pard,” called out a cheery voice from directly in front. “I heard you burnin’ powder, an’ I wanted a hand in. The lady hyar begged me not to leave her father, so back I comes—jest in time to be too late.”

“Twas a fool trick, pard—you’d orter be a long ways from hyar by now,” reproachfully said Bill.

“The varmints is whipped. What difference! Now we kin take our ease. Even s’posin’ them varmints do try to foller us; a bloodhound couldn’t sca’cely keep a trail over these rocks. An’ by day we’ll be fur enough ahead o’ them.”

“I ain’t so sure. They’ve got thar Ebeneezer up powerful, an’ I’ll try hard to git squar’. They know the lay o’ the ground better’n we do, an’ fust thing we know mebbe we’ll run kersplint into a ambush.”

“No danger, pard; ‘cause why. They ain’t a-goin’ to foller the trail we take. They’d see a devil or a spook in every rock an’ bush. They wouldn’t foller us ef we was out in plain sight. You fergit the *Evil Land*, Hurricane,” chuckled Mustang Sam.

“You’re right, pard—as you al’ays air—I did fergit it. I reckon we’ve got the drop on ‘em this time! But,” and Hurricane hesitated. “But how’ll *they* like it?”

“My friends,” said Don Munez, “we are wholly in your hands. Take whatever course you think best, and we will be content. We passed through the *Evil Land* once unharmed; why should we fear to do it again?”

No more was said. The party rode steadily forward, and long before the sun tinged the eastern sky with gold, they were threading the mazes of the far-famed *Mad País*.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE “EVIL LAND.”

SUNRISE in the Evil Land!

The golden rays streamed over a wild, weird scene, strange and fantastic as one of Dore’s conceptions. Here it was a perfect wilderness of sierra; there, a dense chaparral thickly covered with mezquites and nopals, with clumps of cacti and “tiger thorn.” Here the tall rank grass brushed the sides of the fugitives’ horses. Such is the circle that surrounds the volcanic region. A sharper contrast could scarcely be imagined.

All at once this dense vegetation ceases, leaving, scattered far apart, bunches of cacti, a dwarf oak, or perchance two or three cocoa trees, growing out of the cracks in the lava. The ground rumbles and seems to shake beneath the horses’ tread, until one can not help fancying that only a thin crust separates him from some horrible subterranean abyss. The flow of molten lava can easily be traced, undulating, winding in serpentine coils, forming a gigantic mosaic.

Here rises a smooth, polished cone, there another with miniature turrets, not unlike an ant-hill. Some of them are broken; all are hollow, the shell varying from six to twenty inches in thickness. Peering into one, the eye can see nothing save a dense, impenetrable darkness. Drop a stone into the hole, it rebounds here and there, until the sound is lost in the distance.

How far does it descend? One can only conjecture. Yet these black pits are inhabited; by the huge, bloated serpents that may occasionally be seen lazily gliding over the lava-beds.

But there are still other inhabitants of the Evil Land. From the shade of yonder dwarf oak, slinks away a gaunt gray wolf—a “*lobos*,” a species that is known only in Mexico—pausing when at a safe distance to utter a long-drawn, lugubrious howl as if protesting against this invasion of his domain. A family of *javalinas* leap up from their wallowing place with shrill snorts and eye the travelers, viciously champing their long, white tusks, half inclined to attack the intruders. Here the trampling of hoofs starts up a covey of quail, or a couple of grouse; the soft, long-drawn note of the dove was mingled with the more rapid call of the wood pigeon.

Such is the Evil Land and its inhabitants. A native would add demons, gnomes, aphrites; but our friends beheld none of these. The “witching hour” was past.

It was midforenoon when Hurricane Bill called a halt. Both animals and riders were tired, sleepy and hungry. Of water they had a supply, having filled their gourds at a spring just before daylight. Of food, two and a half brace of grouse hung beside Hurricane Bill’s leg. He had dropped them while riding along, with his revolver.

“I reckon this is the best place we kin find,” observed the tall plainsman, as he paused upon the edge of the crater. “It looks cool down thar. Then the critters kin git drink, such as it is. The smoke ‘ll scatter afore it rises the edge hyar.”

Even Don Munoz hesitated but for a moment. Though naturally anxious to reach home and safety as quickly as possible, and dreading lest the bandits should improve the time thus given them, to get before them once more, he saw that Carmela was utterly exhausted. She must rest, in order to have strength to meet the difficulties that might still bestrew their path. Yet it required all his courage to enter what the natives called the Temple of the Evil Spirits.

Dismounting, Hurricane Bill gently lifted Carmela from Tornado’s back and then carried her down to the side of the miniature lake. The big borderer was wonderfully tender and careful; the change became him, too. He tore off huge handfuls of leaves to form a cushioned seat. And he felt a thousand-fold repaid when Carmela’s dark eyes met his in mute thanks. Hurricane Bill was corralled.

A small fire was kindled and the grouse were speedily roasting. The horses were eagerly feeding, after a sniff of disgust at the water. It was jetty black, though clear, at least to the eye. But a myriad frogs, efts and insects of different kinds were swimming and darting about, until the water seemed fairly alive. The margin was fringed with water-plants, some of them in bloom. With an extraordinary display of gallantry, Hurricane set out to pluck a bouquet for Carmela. But he soon desisted, in disgust. Though beautiful, some of them wonderfully delicate in form and hue, the flowers were impregnated with a sickening, fetid odor.

Their food dispatched, all save Hurricane Bill lay down to take a brief sleep. He was to keep guard, though there was little need, for neither Indian nor bandit would willingly venture near the Devil’s Temple. After an hour, he was to arouse Mustang Sam. Two hours would be rest enough, as they hoped to reach the rancho before another day.

With his pipe lighted, Hurricane Bill sat leaning against a lava block, his eyes fixed upon the face of Carmela, who was buried in a deep slumber. Of what was he thinking? Well, reader, you can guess as well as I. He had confessed that the soft-eyed maiden had “corralled” him—that he was “dead-stuck”; that is, in love. Isn’t that enough?

Half an hour passed by. The pipe is extinguished. The head of Hurricane Bill drops forward. He is asleep on post. Yet what can that matter? All is safe. No enemy is near. So he believed. But he was mistaken.

A soft rustling in the grass. A long, beautiful, yet loathsome form glides out upon the lava beside the sleeping maiden. It rears its lance-shaped head, and seems about to launch its hideous length upon the slumberer. But then it resumes its silent progress. Its curiosity appears satisfied. This is but a curious shape of lava. It glides up beside the maiden. Then its head passes beyond hers, doubles around as though meaning to pass by. Perhaps its den is near. But Carmela, with a faint moan, slightly moves her head. Like a flash the serpent flings its head and neck around. A black, forked and

glistening tongue playes silently just above the maiden’s cheek. The fiery eyes seemed riveted upon hers, despite the closed lids. Another movement, however slight, and Carmela’s death-warrant is sealed. For this the serpent appears to watch.

At this moment Hurricane Bill opened his eyes. A glow of horror filled them. He saw the threatening attitude of the snake, and knew that Carmela was in terrible danger. Quick as thought he cocked and leveled his revolver, the silver drop covering the reptile’s head. Yet he hesitated to fire. He saw that to kill the serpent, the bullet must fairly graze Carmela’s temple. And he feared his nerves were not steady enough. Yet he dared not wait. It was the severest trial of his life.

The decision was forced upon him. He heard a faint sigh—Carmela seemed about to waken. And then he fired.

The next instant he was beside Carmela, the serpent clenched desperately in his hands, to be flung away with the same gesture. Yet there was no need. His aim had been true. The serpent’s head had been blown to pieces. And as Carmela, confused, bewildered, sprung up, a lock of hair fell from her temple. The bullet had severed it. Hurricane Bill caught the tress before it could touch the ground.

“It’s nothin’,” he hastily uttered as the two men sprung up. “I just shot a snake—that’s all.”

But Carmela understood it all, as she raised one hand to her temple. The severed hair, the curious tingling where a slight red line marked the skin, the dead snake; all these told a plain tale. And as she saw the black tress in his hand, her eyes flashed a quick message to his.

Hurricane Bill felt queer—as he might have expressed it—all over in spots.” In that glance he read a volume. It said: “You have saved my life once more. You prize that tress, because it once belonged to me. You love me with all your soul. And I—I am not offended!”

Hurricane Bill said nothing just then, for Don Munoz had hastened to his daughter’s side to assure himself that she had indeed escaped the poisonous fangs. But as the tall plainsman squatted down beside Mustang Sam, he quietly uttered:

“I reckon I’ll take a hand in that race you spoke of, pard.”

It was finally decided not to lose any more time there, since the horses were beginning to feel the need of drink. And the sun was excessively warm. Besides, they wished to get out of the *Mal País* by sundown. One night of such traveling was enough.

Mustang Sam—remembering how considerate his partner had been on a former occasion, now won Hurricane Bill’s undying gratitude, by arranging a new order of march. As Buck-skin was the strongest horse, Hurricane and Carmela were to ride him, while Don Munoz and Mustang took “turn about” on Tornado.

Just what passed between the young people—all that they said and a good portion of what they thought—the acute reader can probably guess. One thing is certain. Neither of them ever forgot that ride. It was the beginning of a new life for them both.

CHAPTER XII.

A MATTER OF COURSE.

“Look yonder—see the smoke signals!” muttered Mustang Sam to Hurricane, just before sunset, nodding toward two different points from whence arose slender columns of black smoke. “That means mischief.”

“It’s Injun style, but I b’lieve it’s put up by some o’ those pesky greasers. They’ve sighted us, sure. Well, let ‘em try it on. We sickened ‘em once; I reckon we kin do it ag’in,” quietly replied Hurricane Bill.

“Thar cain’t be more’n a dozen o’ them left?”

“About that, unless they’ve run across help. You mean—?”

“Yes. Thar’s no use in takin’ her in danger. Them ‘scopet bullets is so durned keeless—they hit any thing they hain’t aimed at. We’ll press on to the open ground beyond them hills; an’ then let the old man take his gal. It’ll be plain travelin’ then, an’ I don’t reckon the critters ever wore ha’r as kin overhaul Tornado an’ Buck-skin in a fa’r race.”

This was the decision arrived at by the scouts, they having drawn aside for consultation on discovering the signal smokes. They would cover the retreat of Don Munoz and Carmela, feeling assured that even were the bandits to prove too heavy for them, they could easily give them the slip under cover of night, in those ragged hills, cut up with defiles and canons, filled with a thousand *saug caches*.

Don Munoz demurred; he did not like to leave his brave young friends to face the peril alone. But he was overruled, and finally, for Carmela’s sake, he consented to carry out his part of the programme as laid down by Hurricane.

With Carmela on Tornado, and Don Munoz on Buck-skin, the quartette hastened on and entered a long, narrow defile, just as the bandits broke cover a quarter of a mile away, charging recklessly, with wild, devilish yells of hatred.

“Ride fer your lives now!” cried Hurricane Bill; and then, as the father and daughter dashed rapidly along the pass, the two scouts turned and coolly faced the enemy, though keeping well concealed behind the bowlders.

“Jest look at ‘em! I don’t reckon they know who it is they’re huntin’ so keeless,” laughed Hurricane Bill.

“I reckon it’s the last hunt the biggest part of ‘em ‘ll ever take,” grimly replied Mustang Sam.

The bandits thundered on, rushing to their doom, with a strange lack of caution. But, after all, it was but natural for them to believe that the fugitives had fled straight on. Why should two men face a dozen? They, themselves, were not daring enough to suspect such a thing.

“The blind fools!” muttered Hurricane Bill, as the bandits rapidly advance in a close clump. “Take it cool, pard. Let ‘em come clean to the mouth. We kin wipe ‘em out then, ‘fore they kin think o’ fightin’ or runnin’ away.”

And then, when the riders were not more than twenty yards distant, the two scouts leaped out into the open pass and sent a leaden hail of death into the bewildered bandits. The first shot caused them to draw rein; and then, as the sharp reports followed in rapid succession, each missile claiming a victim, the Mexicans sought to fire. But few of them ever lived to tell the tale of that massacre. Cool and deliberate, yet quick as a veteran sportsman among a cover of quail, the brother scouts picked off the wretches one by one. Three of the outlaws managed to escape. The remainder lay dead before the mouth of the defile. And the terrified fugitives were lent wings by the wild, mocking peal of laughter that rose from the lungs of the victors.

First reloading their weapons, the scouts took a hasty look at the fallen, then started out to catch up a couple of the horses that were still prancing around as if unwilling to abandon their late masters. With some little difficulty the capture was made, and then the scouts rode hard in pursuit of Don Munoz and Carmela. But if Hurricane Bill counted upon another stolen bit of conversation with the soft-eyed, that night, he was disappointed. Don Munoz had no wish to fall into the hands of Black Garcia’s gang again, and he pressed on at a killing pace, reaching his rancho just at day-break. He immediately sent word to the neighbors, and placed himself at their head, forgetting his great fatigue, resolved to avenge the daring Americans in case they had been overpowered, as he feared. Instead, he met them well and hearty.

There is little to add that the reader’s imagination can not easily supply.

There was a little mourning over Don Luis. A little love-making between Isidora and Mustang Sam. Ditto between Carmela and Hurricane Bill, who finally mustered courage to ask the “soft-eyed” to repeat in words the message her eyes had telegraphed to his, when he won that tress of silky hair. A double conference with Don Munoz, who almost forgot his grave demeanor and blue blood, so overjoyed was he at the double confession. And he declared that he’d rather have the two Americans for sons-in-law than the proudest monarchs in the world.

Then there was a grand feast—a “holiday”—attended by every person for miles around; unless it were the few survivors of the once dreaded Black Garcia’s band. And first among the skillful contestants, were Mustang Sam and Hurricane Bill, with Tornado and Buck-skin. Then came the fandango; after it, the ceremony which completed the “corralling” of our two scouts.

For several days the festivities lated. Then the newly-wedded couple settled down to everyday life. They assisted Don Munoz on his cattle farm, and, in two years had fairly doubled the capital. And the Indians soon learned to give that rancho a wide berth.

Don Munoz died two years since. Hurricane Bill and Mustang Sam with their two wives are still living.

THE END.

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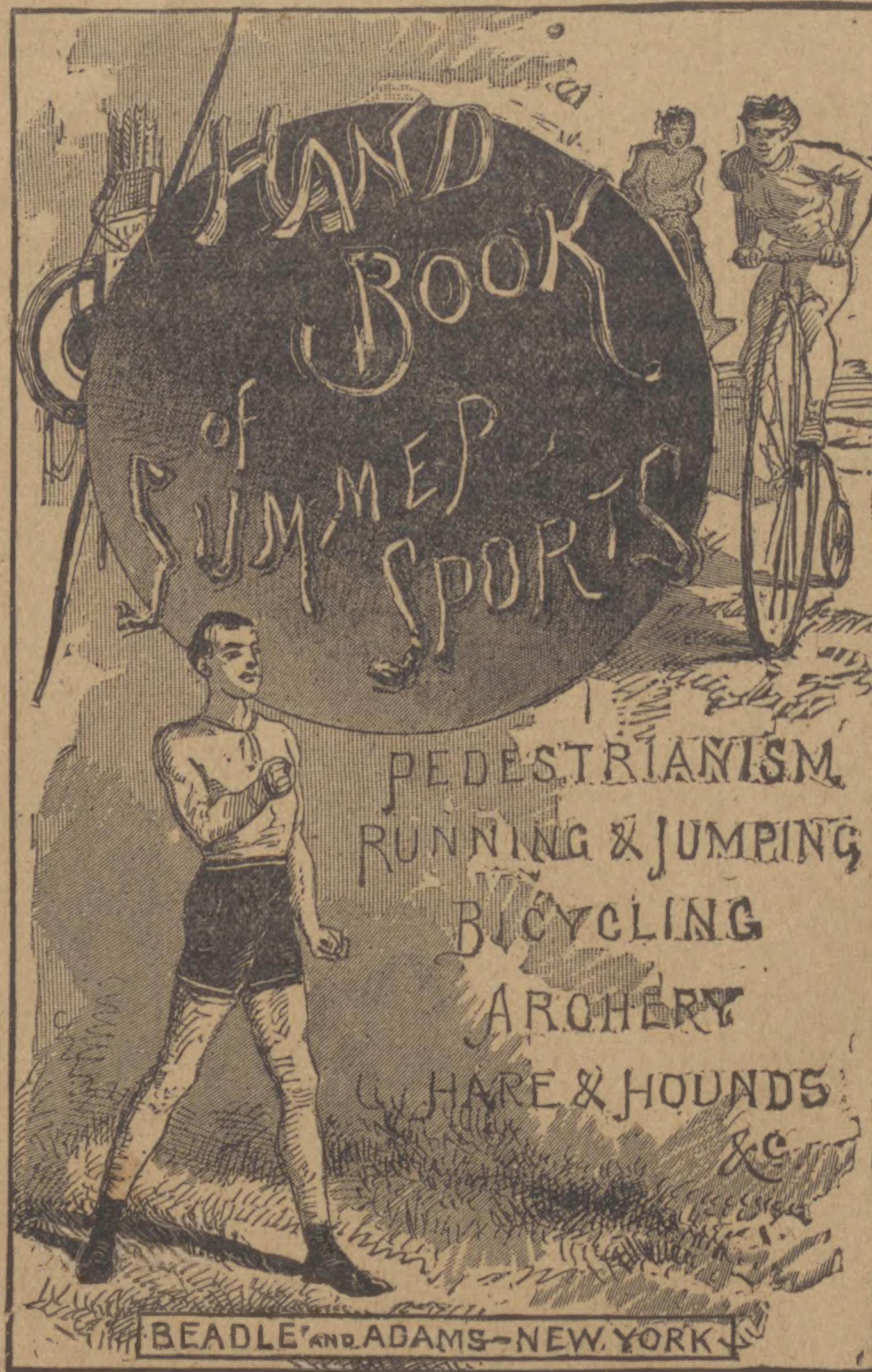
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